

# The Wolf

A TALE FROM CARROCK

SUNSET FRAMED THE GREAT MOUNTAIN. The crimson rays licked the jagged rocks like great fingers of flame and the white top glittered in a burning brightness. No one noticed the black shadow that bounded up the side of the mountain to a great promontory, that looked out over the whole land of Carrock. He was a great beast of pride, his pointed ears turned towards the east, his keen, shining, green eyes carefully regarding the darkening world. The black nose sniffed at the wind and the white muzzle shivered just a bit, letting ivory fangs be visible for a moment. His massive chest was white like his muzzle, though the rest of him was as gray as any wolf. He stood motionless, a lord of his lands, staring out over the beauty. Slowly the sun sank and a nearly full moon began to let its pale light play across the lands. It glittered in the lake at the foot of the mountain. The wolf looked at the moon, threw back his mighty head and howled. Below men trembled at the sound. Again he howled, this time a slightly different note in his voice. He stared out over the land again, before turning and bounding down the mountain.

“The Wolf is back,” Tennek said slowly, looking into his half-empty beer mug. “I heard him last night on the Mountain. I think the old wizard is finally going to get it.”

“Bah,” old Roche grunted with a wave of his hook, “that Wolf is not nearly as big as you make him and the ‘heroic deeds’ could be those of anyone who has a bone to pick with Alick. After all, who doesn’t? That beast is just a wolf and a nuisance at that.”

“But you can’t deny the fact that your dogs weren’t frightened or mad about him,” Pulleny put in. He was a sandy-haired young man with a liking for all animals. “My animals sounded like they do when I come home after a long time away. It was like -- well -- as if the lord himself were coming back.”

“Your stupid mutts can’t tell the difference between a man and a fence post,” Roche laughed. “They might as well go chasing fluff on the pastures rather than watch your sheep. I tell you that ‘Wolf’ of yours isn’t worth one wit. It’s just a pack like all the others. And if I catch one of them near my farm I’m going to let ‘em have it -- bang!” He made a shooting motion with his good hand.

“Old Roche is dreaming again,” Will the barman laughed. “If you think you’ll get *the* Wolf, you’re mistaken. You know I’ve seen that beast with my own two eyes. It was nigh well two years ago.” A hush had fallen over the whole tavern and the men and their women moved their chairs closer to listen to the bartender’s soft, deep voice. It was well known that Will Charou had the gift of stories and no one would miss out on one of his tales, true, tall, or otherwise.

“It was a night much like this last one, only a short time after full moon. His highness had just vanished and the old wizard had taken the throne. I was afraid that there would be robbin’ folk around, trying to get at the good beer in the cellar. And that night it happened. There was a knock on the door after hours and the Gatherers came in.

“‘It’s time for you to pay up,’ the leader said. ‘His lordship wishes for your best ale and fast. Don’t forget to add the salted meat and fresh sausage.’” Will mimicked his voice perfectly, to the amusement of his audience.

“‘Sir,’ I told him, ‘I’m not giving anything. I’ve already paid my taxes and can’t afford to do so again. His “highness” will have to go without.’

“That made those ruffians so mad that they dragged me out to the front yard and pointed their guns at me, but they didn’t do it without several black eyes and two knockouts.” The crowd laughed, eyeing the meaty bartender’s huge fists.

“Still,” he went on, silencing the laughter with his calm voice, “they got me, tied my hands behind my back and pointed their guns at me.

“‘Gimme your key,’ he snapped, but I told him no. He cocked his gun and I could see his finger tighten on the trigger, when suddenly a huge shadow leaped on top of him, growling. I was knocked down and when I looked up I saw the Wolf standing in front of me. His eyes glittered with anger towards the Gatherers and one growl made them drop their guns and disappear. The leader aimed his pistol at the Wolf and was just about to shoot, when the big beast jumped at him and got his ear. Now you know why he always wears that big hat. He ran away yelling in the night and the Wolf turned around to me. I thought he was going to eat me, but he just came around and bit through the rope that tied my hands. I stood up and I could swear that his head came up above my waist and I’m no

small man. He had a white spot on his chest." Will pointed to his own. "He gave me one warning look and then bounded off into the night and vanished." The whole house was silent for a moment.

"Are you sure that you didn't make that up?" a stranger asked out of one corner.

"Mister," Pulleny snapped at him, "the only stories that Will adds to are the ones where he's *winning*. His having been tied up and knocked down should make you believe what he's told you. Maybe you should listen around and hear some of the other stories that are around -- especially those of the Gray Pack. Maybe this one won't be so hard to believe then." The crowd chimed in with loud boos and hisses and the stranger apologized.

"No harm done," Will intoned, "but it's getting to be closing time. You know what the wizard does to people who hang about after hours. I'll see you tomorrow." The people laughed and paid their fares. Only old Roche remained seated, tapping his hook on the bar.

"Impressive story, Will," he remarked with a laugh, "but I hope that that's not what our little group is founded on."

"No, old man, we are founded on getting his highness back in office and the wizard out. With or without the Wolf." The old man nodded and bade his host good night. The bartender looked out into the dark, noticing that tonight the moon was full. He shivered in the fresh air, went into his warm tavern and locked the doors.



**B**EFORE THE SUN HAD SET, he was standing on the promontory again, staring at the rising moon. He pushed the urge down to howl as he waited. It was nearly time. The last rays of the sun wrapped their fingers around the mountain, before they yielded to the twilight and the soft silver rays of the moon. As they touched the giant wolf a change began. Slowly he raised himself up on his rear legs and suddenly they were the legs of a man. The front paws became hands before he came fully erect and the wolf face was gone, in its place a clean shaven young man's face. His hair was gray, like the wolf's and he seemed to be wearing a loincloth of wolf skin. He looked up at the moon and then turned and quickly ran down the mountain.

It was getting cold again and Tabea felt that she wasn't ever going to get warm. She brushed one hand over the white nightgown and then leaned over to toss another piece of wood on the fire. She was a beautiful young woman in her early twenties perhaps, with flowing gold-brown hair and soft blue eyes. There had been many men who'd been attracted to her since *his* disappearance, but she'd sent them all away.

"No, he's *not* dead," she whispered to herself, remembering the day when the news had come. She could still see the staunch and silent Phillip standing in front of her, his eyes on the floor.

"Lady Tabea," he said haltingly, "I -- I've come to tell you that his lordship is dead. A wolf attacked him..."

"Did they find his body?" she snapped back, hiding her shock.

"No..."

"Then he isn't dead. I don't know where he is, but he's *not* dead." She remembered turning around and slamming the door in his face before letting the hot tears of anger and terror run down her cheeks. After all she *was* his woman. *Why did I refuse his offer to take me to the castle?* she asked herself. *Why wouldn't I admit our relationship openly?*

A quiet knocking made her stare at the door. *Shall I pretend no one's home?* No, the fire already gave her away. She stood up and picked up the pistol that was lying on the table and cocked it. Slowly she walked to the door and drew the bolt, cracking it open just slightly.

"Who are you and what do you want?" Her voice was hard and businesslike.

"It's me, Tabea." Her heart leaped.

"Dylan!" She dropped her gun, threw the door open, and her arms around his massive frame. He stood quietly, his hands gently resting on her shoulders.

"Hello, lady love. It's been a long time." She laughed and took his hand pulling him into the warm room. He was wrapped in a warm cloak over a coarse tunic, rough pants and bare feet. He stopped, as if unaccustomed to the house that he had just entered.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"It's just been a long time. The memories just came alive again."

"Yes, almost two years -- and I've waited for you." A shine had come to her soft eyes.

"But I'm afraid you'll have to wait some time longer, lady love," he sighed, sitting down in his old place by the table.

"Why?" She sat down across from him. Looking at his face, she suddenly noticed that his hair had become gray. The rich red-brown was gone and his eyes, they weren't quite right, either. They were still green, but there was something about the pupils. Weren't they like -- like wolf eyes?

"Yes, Tabea, they are wolf eyes," he cut into her thoughts. "I'm enchanted."

"No!" He nodded.

"Yes. You may not believe it, but it's true. This is the one day of the month on which I can be human again, but not completely. My hair stays gray and my eyes stay wrong. I can't see in color, even now. Everything's black and white. I wish I could see your blue eyes clearly just once." He sighed sadly.

"Is there any way I can help?" she whispered, taking his rough hand.

"No -- not yet anyway. I need to find the way out, but I also need to talk to a human being again. If I don't do that on every full moon, I have trouble keeping my mind during the month. It's only one night out of thirty. It's a very hard burden to carry, Tabea, very hard."

"Who did this to you?" she demanded.

"Can't you guess?"

"Alick!" He nodded. She grabbed at the empty air as if trying to find someone's neck.

"If I could get my hands on him, he'd wish he'd never lived," she growled.

"That's not the way to go about it, Tabea. There's only one person who I know can help me right now."

"And that is?"

"Savoy the Scholar. I've been looking for him and have found out that he's here in Carrock. That's why I came back. There's just so much to tell. Will you listen?" She smiled and nodded.

"It was shortly after my birthday two years ago," he began quietly, lost in his thoughts, "and shortly after I'd sent my father away. I went on a hunt with Onri, Phillip, Tennek, and several others. I remember old Roche being there, too. We were after that boar again, you know the one that I wounded as a boy, but that was always able to get away..."

...The wood was dark as the riders pressed on through the underbrush.

"I see him!" Dylan cried, peering into the twilight. Roche gently rested the iron hook that replaced his left hand on the young lord's shoulder.

"M'lord, this is an evil place. We shouldn't go after him."

"Ha," the young man laughed, "there's nothing that can stop me this time!" He shook off the old man's gentle restraint and pressed forward, out of sight of his companions. He could see it well, but it could only smell him, his green and brown clothing blending in with the trees and the dappled horse looking like a shadow. It squealed and ran from him.

"On, on," he urged his steed and leaped forward. In the same instant his head hit a low branch and he found himself sprawling on the ground. The world was spinning, black and white. He felt like his limbs had been twisted off and put back on in the wrong places. Slowly he rolled to his feet and tried to stand up, before he realized that he was standing on all fours. *Now why would I be doing that?* he wondered, but couldn't get up on his feet the way he should. He also realized that, though his vision was impaired, his hearing and sense of smell were much stronger. He knew the smell of horses and heard them crashing through the underbrush. Suddenly they broke from the thicket. It was Onri and Phillip.

"A wolf!" Onri cried, pulling his gun out of its holster on the saddle.

*No, it's me, Dylan,* he tried to say, but only heard yips and howls.

"I'll get rid of that thing before he charges us," the man with the rifle cried, putting it to his shoulder and squinting down the barrel. *I've got to save myself.* The thought shot through the enchanted lord's mind and in the same instant he leaped into the underbrush. A loud bang echoed in the wood, but the bullet missed, embedding itself in a tree. He could hear Onri cursing behind him. *Just get away...get away...*

..."It took a while for me to realize what had happened," Dylan continued. "I had always known that Alick had strange powers, but until it was full moon I wasn't able to know that he was behind it for sure. I hid in the woods for the month, living like a wolf. You can't understand what it's like to suddenly do things that would be natural for a wolf, like marking your territory. It was without thinking, just done, but it shocked me that *I* should be doing that. After all, I still have a human mind." He shook his gray head slowly. "But when the curse is gone, I know I'll be okay. Anyway, shortly before full moon, I felt a change beginning in me..."

...A quiet, dark shadow stopped near the gate to the castle of Carrock, waiting. As the moon touched it, it rose up, taking on the shape of a man. He only wore a loincloth of wolf skin. He looked around quickly and darted through the shadows of the open gate. He knew this ground by heart. There, the storage chambers of the soldiers' clothing. He stole into the dark, his keen wolf eyes not bothered by it. He chose a wide cloak, a tunic, and short breeches, quickly pulling them on. They felt strangely uncomfortable, but he knew that it must be. He put up the hood of the cloak and slipped back into the shadows. There were men sitting around a fire in the courtyard a good ways away. His sharp ears could barely make out the guttural conversation. Suddenly he heard a quiet whisper behind him.

"Roche, is that you?"

"Sh, not so loud, Tennek. They might hear us." The wolf-man slipped up behind them, silently listening in the shadows.

"That old wizard really chose an excellent time to get rid of Dylan." The old man's hushed voice was bitter. "I have this feeling that everything will become worse now."

"I've heard rumors that the wolf Onri and Phillip saw was *not* responsible for his lordship's 'death.' Some people are saying that Alick has the power to change people into animals."

"Bah, old wives tales. I bet he's got his highness in one of the secret dungeons here in the castle. We must be very careful. Alick *must* be toppled before it's too late and the lord is really killed."

"What about the other two?" Tennek whispered.

"Don't trust Onri, whatever happens. He's in with the wizard. I saw him pay a visit to his highness's woman. You can guess what he wanted from her." The other man nodded almost invisibly. Old Roche looked up at the bright moon uncomfortably.

"It is an evil night, my friend, and I'm afraid that the wizard's watchers are about. I'll see you in the next meeting place in four days." With that they parted. Dylan stood in the shadows, holding his breath. So *Alick* was at the bottom of this. He should have known. Silently he slipped out into the shadows and walked along.

A thin wailing caught his sharp ears. It was a little child near the side of the road. He quietly stopped beside it, laying his hand on the child's shoulder. It jumped and tried to pull away.

"I won't hurt you," came his gentle voice. "What are you doing out here all alone?"

"I've lost my way," she cried. "I want to go home."

"Where do you live?"

"Near Will's tavern." It ended in a loud sob. Dylan gently picked her up and threw the folds of his cloak around her to keep her warm against the chilly wind. Quietly singing, he rushed through the night. The little girl clung to his heavy tunic, first growing quiet, then slowly falling asleep. Other than the light in the tavern, only one other house had soft illumination coming from under the shutters. He quickly steered towards it, knocking on the door with his free hand. The child stirred uneasily under his cloak, finally sticking one small thumb in her mouth, and continuing to sleep. The door was opened by a large, beefy man.

"What do you want?" he demanded, letting the barrel of a shotgun become visible.

"Are you missing your daughter?" the wolf-man asked.

"Maybe," the other answered, dark eyes narrowing. Dylan threw back his cloak to reveal the sleeping girl. The man suddenly put his gun away and opened the door.

"My little Stella," he whispered, reaching out to take her from the young lord. There was a cry from inside and a slightly disheveled woman came flying up to take the child in her arms. She looked shyly at the shadow in front of her.

"Thank you, sir," she laughed.

"You're welcome." His voice was soft and pleasant.

“Who are you?” the father asked in wonder.  
“Just call me the Wolf...”

...“I heard that story from Mahesh and his wife some time ago,” Tabea said softly. “They’d given up all hope, thinking that Alick had taken their daughter to sell her as a slave.”

“I heard that later, too. But the story goes on. Shortly before sunrise I went to the great promontory and hid my clothing in a small, dry cave, covering the entrance with a rock. Then I waited for the sun to rise and became a wolf again. In the next weeks I began to look for the Gray Pack, you know, those almost human wolves. I sensed that they were in the area again. Finally one day, shortly after the full moon, I found their trail...”

...He laid low in the thickets, all senses awake. He could see and hear them among the trees, the Gray Pack. There were about fifty of them, the Royal Wolves of Carrock, as intelligent as man, but unconcerned with anything but keeping themselves alive. No one had been able to kill one of their number in years and the legend had it that they were ghosts of the Kings and lords of long ago, come to haunt the woods in the shape of a wolf. Dylan knew, though, that these were flesh and blood. He could smell them, see them and feel them and he was certain that they knew where he was. Slowly he rose to his feet, a peaceful look in his eyes. Instantly the leader of the pack, Scarface, leaped to his feet, growling. A strange yip and howl came from him, that Dylan instantly understood to be wolf-speech.

“Who are you?” Scarface seemed to say. Several long scars on his muzzle gave him that name, memories of fights as a young wolf. His golden eyes glinted with an evil light. He was lord of his wolves and none would challenge him. The enchanted lord knew that.

“I am a Wolf of Carrock,” he tried to say and realized that the other understood him. “I wish to join your pack.” The leader looked up to him, since Dylan was bigger than any of the other beasts that now had risen up to watch the challenge.

“You want my place,” Scarface snapped.

“No, I just want to join you.”

“You want my place, but you won’t get it.” It ended in a snarl. The leader’s ears had gone back, his lips curled up, showing the white fangs. The wildness of the challenge heated the young lord’s blood and he could restrain himself no longer. He snarled back, green eyes taking on a deadly shine. Scarface didn’t wait, but launched himself at the bigger wolf, trying to go for his neck. Dylan ducked his head, catching the sharp teeth just above his ear. He shook himself, knocking his smaller adversary to the ground. The old wolf was on his feet again instantly and renewed his charge. Biting and leaping they circled around in front of the others of the Gray Pack. Scarface launched himself in the air, landing on Dylan’s head with his forelegs. The great Wolf shook his head once and Scarface landed on his back. The lord pounced, burying his teeth in the soft neck of the leader of the Grey Pack. He could taste the blood in his mouth. Scarface struggled weakly and then lay still. Dylan slowly let go and raised his head in a howl of triumph. In an instant the wolves came around him, greeting their new leader...

...“Sometimes I wish a man could have seen that fight. It would be something for the songs of the bards.” He laughed just slightly savagely, but then became thoughtful. “That was the only time I killed another wolf and it was also the only time I really let my instincts go. My mind is still stronger than my gut, but it’s becoming weaker. If I don’t find a way out of my wolf form soon, I will become one completely. It has become more painful to change back into my human form lately. And it’s so hard to resist when the wolf-maids come into heat.” He shuddered at the thought and so did Tabea.

“But you’ve controlled yourself?” It sounded hopeful.

“Yes, lady love, I have, but mainly by leaving the pack for those weeks. It’s also during that time that I visited my father...”

...He was away from the pack for three weeks now. The heat would be ending soon, but he needed to find someone. He knew a special time of the year was coming, though he couldn’t tell how he knew. He’d crossed the border of Carrock some days earlier and now was nearing the city of Enfurt. He knew his father was in exile there, sent there by Dylan himself. Slowly night came on and suddenly he felt the heat before the change, but it wasn’t full

moon yet. He bounded on, meaning to reach the city by twilight. Then he saw the high, fortified walls before him. The transformation came over him like a burning wave and suddenly he howled. He put his head down and rose to his feet, a full man. His hair was now a deep red-brown and his eyes a clear, clean green and he could see in color. A cold wind whipped by him, making him realize that he had no clothes on. He stole into a small farm just a short ways ahead of him and found that the woman there had forgotten some clothes on the line. He would just borrow them for the night. Quickly, he took the rough, brown breeches and beige tunic. He remained barefoot. Slowly he turned towards the city.

The gates were on the verge of closing when he got there, because in peacetime they remained open until midnight. He rushed forward to make it through.

“Who are you?” the guard demanded as he tried to pass.

“My name is Dylan. I am looking for Colyn á Carrock.” The guard looked over his disheveled appearance.

“It looks to me more like a beggar trying to get some wages than anything else.” He laughed coarsely. “Get yourself in there. His highness lives in the White House below the castle.” The young lord thanked him and ran up the rough, smelly streets. There was loud laughter out of many taverns and he could also see couples walking along the side streets to some more private places. His thoughts suddenly turned to Tabea. How was she? Had she kept her promise? He sighed and walked along, finally reaching the gate to the castle. It was shut tight, but light came from slits in the shutters of a large house that had a whitewashed front. That must be the White House. He slowly walked up and knocked on the door. A young maid eventually came to the door, her blonde hair tousled and her dress hurriedly thrown on.

“Yes?” she asked, not one bit pleased to be roused out of her bed.

“I am Dylan á Carrock. I would like to speak to my father.” She eyed him for a moment.

“Come in while I announce you.” She sounded like she was speaking to a beggar. He smiled to himself a bit ruefully, realizing that he looked the part. She vanished through the door to a lighted room. He could hear quiet voices speaking and then she came out again.

“His lordship will see you,” she announced without a curtsy. The young man stepped through the door and instantly felt the warmth of the fire and was glad to really feel it for the first time in a year. He turned slowly to see his father sitting in a chair. His hair was white now and he was dressed in a rich silk tunic and wine-colored breeches. A beautiful woman stood next to him, one hand resting on his shoulder. Her hair was like deepest night, but her skin white. The brown eyes gazed at Dylan with anger. His father’s green eyes were full of pity. Dylan bowed low.

“Sir, I’m sorry to disturb you at this hour,” he began.

“My son, you are welcome at all times, even after what you have done to me.” The old man’s voice was rich and clear. He turned to the maid who was still standing at the door.

“Alisande, get my son a chair and clean yourself up a bit before getting something to eat. You will join us.” The girl curtsied and brought a stool-like chair without a backrest for Dylan before rushing out of the room.

“That is my foster daughter, son, and you should treat her like your sister. She is the only servant we have and it is her own wish.”

“You mean, you live *alone* here?” Dylan asked.

“Yes, it’s easier for Roanna and me.” The old man patted the woman’s hand gently, before carefully appraising his son. “And what brings you here, my son?”

“I need your help, father. You see, I’m enchanted.” At that moment Alisande came back into the room, her dress now properly put on, carrying a large tray with fruit, meat, and wine. She placed it on a low table between the men and drew up a chair for the Lady Roanna, poured wine for the three of them, and then remained standing.

“Come sit at my feet, my daughter,” Colyn prompted and the girl obeyed. “Now, my son, tell me your tale.” Dylan quickly recounted his fate during the last year. The old man sat quietly, stroking his white beard thoughtfully.

“I knew Alick had something like that planned,” he finally admitted. “That’s what kept him from doing it. When you sent me away you took away the protection that my knowledge gave you. I knew that he was a wizard from the time he began to work in our house. I would have told you at the right time, but you sent me away beforehand.”

“Why did you keep him then?” the young lord demanded, a bit shocked.

“Because it was a promise to his father -- and I don’t break promises. Now he is at the pinnacle of his power. Only you can topple him and you have little time. But first, rest here for the night, we will see what else comes tomorrow.”

“But, sir, at sunrise I will become a wolf again.” The old lord laughed.

“No, my son, tomorrow is Alick’s birthday. For that day his power over any living thing that he has enchanted is broken. That is why you are fully human. At sunrise on the day after tomorrow you will take your wolf-shape again. So now rest, my son.” He nodded to the girl at his feet. “Alisande will show you your bed.”

He followed the girl up the stairs and down a long hall. She opened a door to a chamber with a large bed in it.

“Here is your room, my lord,” she said quietly.

“Alisande, you don’t have to talk to me like that.”

“It’s okay, sir. It’s just that I’ve never called any man by his first name ... and I never knew my real father.” He nodded and followed her into the room. She quickly lit the candles and then began to leave. As she was in the door she stopped and turned back to Dylan.

“Why did you send him away?” she asked.

“My father?” She nodded. He sighed, letting himself sink onto the big bed.

“He took another woman before my mother died. She was sick for a long time, but he still should have waited. It is the law of our fathers and it hurt me to pronounce it on him. If I’d known better I think I would have let it pass.” He sighed again. “The Lady Roanna will never forgive me for that.”

“She doesn’t understand it very well, sir,” the girl returned. “Your father says so anyway.”

“He’s your father, too, Alisande.” She smiled a bit sadly at that.

“Perhaps. Good night, Dylan -- sir.”

“Good night, sister.” With that she turned and left the room.

The morning came and Dylan found new clothing lying for him in his room. He quickly pulled the fresh-scented things on and went to have breakfast with his father. Afterwards he went with Alisande to see the city. She proved to be a capable and witty guide, but it didn’t escape the young lord that near the end of their time that day, her eyes had become filled with a strange adoration and her face was quite flushed as she spoke with him. The evening came, but he did not have the chance to talk to her, since after dinner his father asked to speak with him. His father pulled his high-backed chair up to the fire and Dylan seated himself on a stool. The old man took plenty of time to fill his pipe and when it was finally going he spoke to his son.

“I have been thinking a lot about your problems, Dylan. There is only one person that can help you now. His name is Savoy the Scholar and he is said to be very close to the Word. Even when I was young he was a great man. He still lives, though no one knows where. Perhaps in Carrock, perhaps elsewhere. But you must hurry, my son, because with each month that passes the enchantment takes a greater hold on you. You must keep your mind strong, because if you let your instincts win, then you will become a wolf completely and being human will be torturous to you.”

“I can’t let that happen, Father. For me, for Tabea, and for Carrock. I’ll find a way to break this and topple Alick. And when I do...”

“Don’t promise anything too early my son.” Colyn noticed that a strange shine had come into the young man’s eyes. “It is getting towards midnight, and if you want to be in the woods before dawn, you should leave soon.”

“Thank you for everything, Father. I promise that when I have my place again, I’ll bring you back to Carrock.”

“We will see what the council says, my son. After all, they agreed to your step.”

“We’ll see, but I don’t want to leave any bitterness between us.” The old man smiled and his son rose and embraced him, before running up the stairs and into his room to change back into the clothes that he’d “borrowed.” There was a good pouch of money for the family now, too. He turned to leave and saw Alisande standing in the doorway, dressed in a white nightgown and holding a candle in her hand.

“Are you going away?” she asked, just a bit frightened. He nodded.

"I'll miss you," she whispered, put down the candle, ran, and hugged him. He suddenly realized that this was not a sister's love.

"Alisande," he said sadly, stepping out of her embrace, "I already have a woman in Carrock."

"Are you married?" she asked.

"Not yet openly, but as soon as the enchantment is broken..."

"But can't you have *two*, like your father?" she blurted, then putting one hand over her mouth.

"No, it's against the law, but I couldn't marry you anyway, since you are my sister." There was a gentleness in his voice, but she didn't want it to be true, not this.

"Only -- only your *foster* sister."

"Still, before the law you are like my real sister." She sat down on the edge of the bed, pressing one hand to her mouth, tears flowing silently. He stroked her hair gently, thinking, *She's only a child, falling in love with the first stranger she meets.*

"I promise you that there is someone waiting for you, Alisande, but it's not me. I will take you back to my land with my father when the spell is broken and then you'll see what I mean, hm?" He searched for her soft gray eyes and found them. They were still unbelieving, but the admiration had changed. She nodded silently.

"I have to go, but we'll see each other again some day, little sister." With that he took her hand and kissed it. Then he turned and went away...

..."So she knows?" Tabea asked, a bit shocked.

"My father knew all along," he sighed. "I never kept it secret from him. He just said, 'As long as she's your only one,' and left it at that. Then he took Roanna." He shook his gray head and looked towards the window.

"Lady love, it's turning towards dawn. I have to go ... oh!" He pressed one hand to his chest, a wave of agony sweeping through his body.

"I've waited too long already. I only have a half hour," he gasped and reached into the folds of his cloak, retrieving a small whistle on a golden necklace. "My father gave me this for you. If you ever get in trouble, blow it, and the Wolf will come to help you." The cramps assailed him again.

"Farewell, sweet maiden," he moaned, jumped up, tore the door open and ran out into the black. Tabea stumbled after him, watching his form disappear into the last hours of night.

"Dylan!" she screamed, put one hand to her head and stumbled back into the house, closing the door behind her. Tears of exhaustion and unhappiness flowed down her face and she fell into her bed, silently sobbing for a while before sleep and the first rays of dawn overtook her. She did not hear the mourning howl of the Wolf that went up from the promontory of the mountain.



**T**HE CASTLE WAS ALIVE WITH BUSTLING PEOPLE, so few noticed the splendidly clothed gentleman who rode up through the gate. He had a bright red feather in his hat and wore a tunic and breeches in shades of scarlet. His boots were also a rusty brown, nearing red and his holster was made of shimmering snakeskin, its green the only other color in this man's clothing besides the white fur on his long, red rider's coat. His face was lethargic and his black hair hung lank and lifeless to his shoulders. He had a small moustache and deadly, dark eyes. He laughed self-indulgently as he got off his horse and patted its flank before waving a bejeweled hand to call a boy to take it away. He rushed through the inner courtyards and up several flights of stairs to a small door leading to a tower. He knocked once and went in without waiting for an answer. Inside a fairly tall, lanky man was sitting, clean-shaven with salt and pepper hair. He was dressed all in blackish-blue and bent over a low table that had a crystal ball and a big book on it. As the flashy young man entered, he looked up.

"Ah, Onri, you are late again," he snapped.

"I am so sorry, Alick," Onri said languidly, taking off his hat and throwing it on one of the unlighted torches on the wall. "But it was just the most difficult thing to get out of bed this morning. Especially with Mareesa. She just *can't* have enough."

"If I know you, you can't either," the wizard snapped. He'd always hated the young man's lust for many women. "You should have been up early this morning, and you would have, if you'd heard what I did."

“Dylan?” the beau asked, sitting up.

“He’s back again and the Gray Pack with him. At least I still have *some* time to prepare for any attacks.” Onri sank back into his chair and played with a glass of wine standing next to him.

“Alick, I just *can’t* understand why it had to be a *wolf*. I mean, couldn’t it have been anything else, like a rabbit? They’re easier to catch and kill.”

“A wolf is just easy enough, if you hadn’t botched the job,” the wizard growled, getting up and beginning to play with a beautifully carved and painted wooden wolf. It was howling, the eyes shut and there was a large white spot on its chest.

“I will explain again that there are certain rules that no wizard can break and you know that,” the older man was becoming more animated now. Onri just sipped at his wine. “I wanted to make him an eagle and cage him here in my castle. That would be more fun than to have the Wolf roaming around the woods in *my* lands!” The wizard cursed and set the figurine down on the mantelpiece again. “But it is his character. He is wild, but noble and always ready to help.”

“And what beast is nobler than a Royal Wolf of Carrock,” Onri said with a yawn, “I know, I know!”

“Then why do you ask, you idiot?” Alick’s face slowly began to burn and his rich baritone turned very sharp. “After all *you* were in this from the beginning, and if it hadn’t been for you and your filthy friends, that wolf would be dead and we’d be rid of our problems.”

“But I still wouldn’t have what I want most!” Onri yelled back. Alick suddenly became calm again.

“Ah, yes, the maiden Tabea.” He chuckled softly. “I believe that she has had some very -- er -- unpleasant times since her lover disappeared.”

“Of course *she* was the *only* one who didn’t know that *everyone* here at the castle knew that *she* and *him* were lovers!” the young man groaned in his almost feminine voice. “Poor little fool.”

“She could be *so* happy with you.” Alick mimicked Onri’s voice perfectly. He chuckled to himself. “No, no, she was happier with Dylan than she could *ever* be with you,” he continued. “You’d probably take what you wanted, maybe have her a few more times and then get the next girl.” He shook his head at the unbelieving young man. “Onri, Onri, don’t you know that I can read you like a book? Don’t you know that I know how many girls go through your house in *one week*?” He luxuriated in the dandy’s shocked face. “But don’t worry, Dylan will never find out, *if* you do as I say. I think Miss Tabea needs a visit and an offer of protection from you, my friend, don’t you think?”

“Yes, yes,” Onri slowly came out of his daze. “But why now?”

“Fool, last night was full moon!” the wizard hissed. “Don’t you know what happened to *him* and where *he* went, huh? I will give you three guesses and then I think I’ll change *you* into an animal. Probably a sulky hare or a whining dog would be your other form, though I would rather like a toad to keep around and to step on at times.” His heavy booted foot came down on the floor. The other jumped up, grabbed his hat and ran from the room, fleeing the diabolical laughter that echoed through the castle.

Tabea felt rather tired as she tended to her chickens. They were contentedly pecking at the seeds she scattered around. This was her farm. It wasn’t big, but there was still enough room for the two cows and few chickens. She grew most of her food in the garden and sold some rare herbs to the people who needed them. Her butter was also some of the best in the area and a favorite of the castle, *when* there was some left to sell to them. Usually the poor folk got it first. Even so, she had a very comfortable life, even after Dylan disappeared. Dylan... The name brought back memories and she looked up, expecting to see him like she had for the first time, some five years ago. It was shortly after the men had come to foreclose the farm. Her father had died with big debts and she couldn’t pay. It wasn’t just that they wanted to sell her land, but her also. *I couldn’t bare that*, she thought and carefully put the rest of the seed she had in her apron back into a big barrel.

Then he’d come. She had asked for help and the son of the lord of Carrock had come. She’d told him about what they wanted from her and he pulled out a sack of gold coins.

“Here, this will take care of all of your needs for a while,” he laughed and rose to leave.

“Will you come back?” she asked as he mounted his dappled horse.

"If you want me to, fair maiden," he'd answered. And there was something warm and tender in his eyes that she couldn't name. Then he rode away. He did come back, often, and they became lovers. Then she remembered his offer.

"Tabea, I want to take you to the castle and make you my woman the way it should be."

"No, I don't want it to be that way. This is just fine." She pulled her robe more tightly around her.

"Why not?" He laid his hands on her shoulders. "I want to dress you in silk and make you the lady you are. You are more pretty than any of the girls at the palace and I want them to know who stole my heart." She turned around and looked in his eyes.

"No, Dylan, I won't. I don't want them to know that the Lord of Carrock loves a simple farm girl. They would think less of you and I couldn't bare that." He was silent, sad. When he left shortly before noon, he didn't say another word about it. She only saw him once more before he vanished. She sighed to herself. *Now he's back*, she thought. *If he offers this to me again, I'll say yes. I can't stand his being gone.*

"Tabea!" The call came from a good ways away. *No, not that fool Onri*, she thought angrily. She reached for her rifle and weighed it in her arm.

"What do you want?" she snapped as he rode up. He didn't answer, but swung off his horse and made a gallant bow.

"My lady, I have come to offer you my protection."

"From whom?" He stepped closer with a shrug and devoured her shapely figure with his eyes.

"From wild beasts, people who might want the farm, or maybe wolves."

"Shall we say from -- *Dylan*?" He jumped back. Now the rifle was pointing at his chest, cocked.

"The only thing I need protection from is the likes of you, Onri," she snapped. "I've told you before, I'm waiting for Dylan, if he's dead or alive. I've promised him and no man will touch me, but him, is that clear." The dandy's face was as red as his shirt, but he nodded slowly.

"Now get out of here before I change my mind and blow you away." He stumbled backwards and swung himself on his horse.

"This is not the last time we've talked, Tabea. I'll get you yet." He turned his steed and thundered over the farmyard and away. She sighed lowering the rifle. Now her day was thoroughly ruined, but there still was a lot to do. She didn't notice the Wolf resting at the edge of the woods, guarding her little farm.



"HE'S DONE IT AGAIN!" Alick thundered, hurling a full glass of wine into the fireplace. "He's not back two days and he does it *again*. ..., I hate that Wolf." He cursed loudly and turned to where Onri was standing with a cloaked figure.

"What of Tabea?" the wizard snapped.

"The usual," the dandy said in a surly mood.

"That girl always has the best of you, doesn't she?" the cloaked figure laughed.

"Oh, shut up!" Onri nearly screamed. "I'll get her yet!" With that he turned and stalked out of the room.

"Poor girls tonight," the man in the cloak sighed.

"Never mind about that, do you have anything to report?" Alick interrupted.

"The meeting is set for the full moon, as you wanted, sir, but the old man wanted to pick the place himself, he's not going to tell anyone until the night when we go."

"If that's the way it is. At least take a watcher with you."

"No, sir, if I do that, then they'll know. Roche is not stupid. He doesn't believe in magic, but he has eyes in his head."

"Then I'll take them out with his hook when he's in my dungeons," the wizard said with relish. "Go now." The cloaked man bowed and left the castle. He didn't notice the wolf that was lying among the high trees near the road. Suddenly it sprang on him. He tried to free his dagger, but his arm got caught in his cloak. He heard a tearing and the wolf darted away, part of the sleeve of his tunic in its mouth.



There was much laughter in the Tavern that night and Will noticed with great satisfaction that the drinks were really being bought.

“So, master barkeep,” Roche growled, tapping his hook on the counter top, “what is the latest news on the Wolf?”

“They say the Gray Pack freed a whole company of slaves being taken away to be sold!” Pulleny laughed.

“What makes you so happy, Stev?” the old man asked, brushing through his short white beard.

“My mother and sister happened to be in that company,” the young man returned.

“So tell us about it, Stev Pulleny!” someone cried. The young man grinned from ear to ear and began his tale...

...Twilight was coming on and the slaves were being pushed along at a great speed. The leader constantly looked into the woods to his right and to his left.

“I don’t like this at all,” he muttered. “Specially since the Gray Pack came back.”

“Don’t talk about them!” another soldier whispered. “It’s bad luck.” In the same instant some fifty gray shadows leaped from among the trees. There were only seven soldiers tending the slaves. One of them was able to get his gun around before one wolf locked its jaws on his wrist hard. Blood spurted. The man screamed and tried to get loose. The wolf let go and he ran down the road, still screaming. The others just split the place, except for the leader and his companion. Two huge wolves leaped at them from behind, pinning them to the ground. All the leader could see was two wolf feet coming at him, then a loud sniffing. There was a quiet yip and growl and the weight vanished off his back. He jumped up and ran away. The other soldier got the same inspection, but stayed on, much to the awe of the people. There was something in his eyes. He walked towards the biggest Wolf.

“Sir, I want to stay and help, if you don’t mind,” he said. The Wolf bowed his head slightly and then his pack went among the slaves, their sharp teeth making quick work of the ropes. Prisca Pulleny collapsed, only to be caught by the wide back of the Wolf. He sniffed at her and licked her cheek lightly. She opened one eye and squeezed it shut again, before looking at him again. Did he look friendly or what? Slowly the little girl stood up and put one hand out. The Wolf didn’t move. She touched his shaggy head and stroked it, as if he was a big dog. He gently took an edge of her dress in his teeth and pulled.

“Shall we go?” she asked. The Wolf didn’t answer, but turned and trotted off down the road. Prisca ran to catch up with him and put her hand on his large neck. It didn’t seem he’d noticed her. The slaves followed his slow jog until they were too tired to go on. The Wolf let the little girl climb on his back for a while, then he stopped in a clearing. His bright howl split the night and they all settled down, the Gray Pack keeping watch.

“They’re nice wolves, aren’t they, Mommy?” Prisca asked as her mother wrapped her arms around her.

“Yes, Prisca, they are the *lord’s* wolves.”

“The Lord Dylan’s?” Her mother nodded, not knowing that their lord was right near them...

“Well, that big one brought Mom and Prisca home safe and sound this morning,” Stev Pulleny finished his story.

“Oh, he did, did he?” Roche laughed. “You must be dreaming.”

“Well, my Mom is safe at home and my sister is safe at home and I happened to see them coming down the lane with Prisca riding the Wolf!” There was loud murmuring in the Tavern. “You can ask my Mom if you want,” the young man cried.

“All right, all right, kid, I believe you,” the old man said. He looked around at the people.

“Say, Will, where’s Tennek?”

“Haven’t seen him yet today. Told me yesterday, he had some business to tend to.”

“Oh.”



**I**T WAS NEARING FULL MOON AGAIN. Dylan could feel it in his bones. It was also nearly heat time. The first wolf-maids were flirting around and he had to get out. He roused himself and slowly left the pack. Only Brownie would know where he was going. His favorite wolf. The one who would be the leader when the spell was

broken. He remembered that night when Brownie had witnessed the change. They knew he was different, perhaps enchanted, but only this one knew for sure. Dylan had explained it to him in wolf speech. It wasn't quite full moon yet, but he needed to get away. First to the promontory.

He got there quickly enough and opened the hiding place to where his clothing was. He'd gotten it ready this way last time, with a rope around it to carry it. He slipped his head through the loop and slowly trotted off towards the small farm nearby.

Tabea thought she heard a scratching and whining at the door. *But I don't have a dog.* Was it a ploy? She put down the stitching she was doing and picked up her pistol. Cautiously she opened the bolt and looked out. In the same instant a big wolf nosed its way in the door. She screamed and backed away, leveling her gun at it, but it calmly sat on the floor and howled one solitary note. The girl suddenly relaxed.

"Oh, Dylan, you scared me," she laughed and put her arms around the big beast's neck. He just growled softly and lay down beside the fire. She noticed that he'd dropped something on the floor and picked it up. It was a bundle.

"It's your clothes. Right, it's nearly full moon and you'll change back again." He shivered slightly.

"I'll be so happy to hear you talk again, but now it's my turn." And so for the next few hours she talked to the wolf, telling him of things like Onri's visit (which interested him very much) and of her chickens (which he thought to be quite boring).

"Okay, I'm going to bed," she said finally. He gave her a watchful look and thumped his tail on the floor. *I'll stay here.*

"Good, then see you tomorrow." And she blew out the candle. Dylan rested peacefully that night. The next day he tried to help as he could, carrying pails for her and digging a new row to plant sweet corn in the garden. They also played tag together and had a lot of fun walking along the edge of the woods.

"It's nice that I get to spend one day with you like this," Tabea laughed. "It's different and not quite as nice as when you're a man, but it's still fun." He just grunted in return. That evening she sat on the floor and read to him out of a big book her father had once read to her out of, one arm around his neck. A quiet knock sounded, then two more.

"Stev?" she called.

"It's me," came the muffled reply. Tabea got up and opened the door. The young man hurried in, his cloak on and his hat pulled low into his face. He breathed heavily and took the heavy hat off.

"Roche just told me where we'll be tomorrow. We meet at ten." A quiet, friendly growl from the fireplace alerted him. The Wolf got up, came over, and sat down beside Tabea.

"What's *he* doing here?" Pulleny gasped.

"He's my guest for a while, at least until he decides to go, right?" The Wolf seemed to smile and thumped his tail on the floor, but in his eyes there was a look of royalty and freedom, making Stev realize that this Wolf was a lord in his own way.

"Where are we meeting?" the girl asked, cutting into his thoughts.

"At Dylan's old block hut. We don't go there often since they surprised us a year ago, but now it's safe again." She nodded and offered him some of her fresh milk and bread before he left.

"No, I still have to find Tennek and the others," he answered and disappeared into the night. Dylan strolled back over to the fire and laid down, his head between his paws, a thoughtful look in his eye. Suddenly he sprang up and scratched at the door.

"You have to go?" she asked sadly. The royal head went down once, sadly, and the eyes seemed to say, *not for long.* She sighed and opened the door. The big animal vanished into the night, leaving her alone and forlornly standing on her porch.

A howl outside her house woke her. It was the darkest part of the night, shortly before dawn. She got out of her bed and wrapped her robe around her against the chill of the night. She rubbed her eyes, shuffling to the door. She opened it carelessly and the great Wolf bounded in with something in his mouth.

"Oh, you're back!" was all she realized, closing the door behind her. She sat down next to him, where he was lying by the dying flames and rested her head on his back. The next thing she knew, something soft and wet

was tickling her ear. She looked up to see the Wolf's friendly face right by hers, the head cocked to one side. He gave a quiet yip, as if saying, *come on, get up, girl!* Slowly she sat up, drawing a hand across her face and then pushing it through her tousled hair.

"Where did you come from, Wolf?" she asked sleepily. He just tugged on the edge of her robe with his teeth, green eyes serious. Then he turned to something on the floor and nosed it lightly.

"What is that?" Tabea bent and picked it up. It was a piece of embroidered cloth, probably from the tunic of a very rich man.

"Whose is this?" The green eyes of the Wolf narrowed and a low growl escaped his throat.

"I see, someone you hate. A traitor, maybe?" He just stared at her silently. She sighed and brushed through her hair again, dropping the cloth on the rough table.

"I'm going to get dressed and take care of the cows and the chickens," she announced. "Then I'm going to the pond for a bath and then we'll be on our way to your log cabin." Said and done. After her bath she dried and dressed, finally lounging with the Wolf, staring out into the shady woods. Her hands hardly rested, weaving daisies together in a chain. Yes, spring was here again.

"And that must be very hard on you, dear," she whispered, stroking the great shaggy head.

The afternoon was nearly gone when the Wolf suddenly jumped up and nudged Tabea's sleeping form. She blinked her eyes open, unsure at first where she was. Slowly she sat up and looked at the slanting rays of the sun that broke through the trees.

"The meeting!" she suddenly cried, leaping to her feet. *Now you've got it!* Dylan thought and raced through the woods to the farm. He got there first, sitting on the porch with his long tongue hanging out, panting. She came up, went in, and picked up the bundle of clothes and the piece of cloth he'd brought her. Then she changed into a pair of pants and a tunic, throwing a light jacket on over that and stuffing her feet into heavy boots. She strapped her holster around her waist and checked her pistol before sticking it in its place. Next she picked up an unadorned, broad-brimmed hat and hid her hair under it. Finally she was ready to go and Dylan was a bit amused at the way she looked now. *That is quite different than I'm used to seeing her,* he laughed silently.

They went off through the woods, the sun slowly drifting down along the horizon. Not much time left. Must warn the Pack. The great Wolf paused and gave a long, solitary howl. It was answered close by and another wolf bounded from among the ferns. This one had a brown spot between his pointed ears.

"Brownie, get the pack to the block hut and set up a guard tonight," Dylan ordered in wolf speech.

"But it's heat time, Dylan," he whined. "The wolf-maids will distract us."

"Control yourselves just for tonight! It's important. Now get moving!" The last command sounded like a sharp growl to Tabea, who was standing there, a bit afraid. The smaller wolf bowed its head and dashed back into the forest and the two travelers hurried on their way.

Tabea noticed that the Wolf's step was becoming uneasy, as if he were in pain. He constantly grunted and yipped to himself, stopping to look behind him, to the west. The sun was nearly gone and suddenly it vanished. In the same instant the Wolf rose up to become the tall and solemn Dylan á Carrock.

"Hello, lady love," he said, smiling. He quickly dressed and they hurried on through the woods, the girl trying to match her lover's long, measured strides. He caught her several times as she stumbled over the rough terrain. His keen wolf-sight made it easy for him to see the path. They reached the little block hut shortly before midnight, with only one short rest for Tabea. Suddenly Dylan stopped, still hiding in the trees.

"Come on, what are you waiting for?" she demanded, tugging his sleeve.

"I want to see who is coming," he returned quietly. And so they waited. Old Roche arrived first. Dylan could tell by the glint of the hook in the moonlight. Several more cloaked figures arrived in the next minute. The wolf-man sniffed the air as each of them passed close to their hiding place. Finally two men hurried along. They seemed to be the last ones. The young lord instantly recognized Stev Pulleny's hurried gait. The other one -- yes, that was *him!* A slightly savage grin played across the wolf-man's face, before he silently broke out of the bushes, pulling Tabea along after him. The other two had entered the house, closing the door behind them.



“So we’re all here,” old Roche said with a grin. “Finally at our favorite place again.” He quickly counted the heads there. Eight, one too few.

“Okay, who’s missing?”

“The kid is,” Phillip returned quietly.

“And he’s never late,” someone else remarked.

“Pulley?” The young man shrugged.

“I went to pick him up, but he’d already gone.”

“Great!” the old man snapped. “There’s our hole.”

“No, I’m here all right!” A slim figure stepped through the door, followed by a massive, cloaked one.

“Finally, Yon!” Roche was clearly relieved. The “kid” kept himself out of the light of the lantern on the table, as did his big friend.

“And who is that?” Tennek questioned.

“They call me the Wolf,” came a low growl. Tennek shivered. It sounded wolf-like enough. Roche elbowed Stev in the side, as if to say, “I told you so.”

“Why are you here?”

“Because of what Alick has done to Dylan á Carrock.” The old man’s black eyes narrowed pensively.

“Very well, you may stay for now, Wolf.” Then he turned to the others. “We have a leak. I don’t know who it is or where, but that person better beware when I find him!” His voice was menacing.

“I know who it is,” Tennek suddenly snapped. He turned around and pointed a finger into the shadows, where the two unknowns were standing.

“It’s that ‘kid’ of yours. He -- or should I say *she* -- is the one you’re looking for.” A quiet gasp went through the small group.

“Yon, come here,” Roche ordered calmly. The “kid” slowly stepped forward into the light, head lowered. Tennek suddenly reached out and grabbed the wide hat off her head. Long, golden-brown hair cascaded around her shoulders.

“There I’ve told you!” he laughed. “She and Pulley are in this together. It was him who brought her to the meetings.” The girl raised her head and looked straight at Roche.

“Tabea!”

“Who are you going to believe, Roche? Me or him?” she asked evenly.

“I know that you would *never* betray Dylan, but a woman is not allowed in this circle. You have to go home.”

“Let her stay,” came the wolf-voice from the corner.

“No. I can’t, it’s against the rules.” The old man stared hard into the corner, quietly tapping his hook on the table.

“Even if *I* asked you?” The voice suddenly changed, becoming the gentle, royal tone that all of them had missed. The big figure stepped into the light, drawing back the hood. There was a gasp.

“Dylan!” Stev cried joyfully. All of them sank to one knee. The lord waved one hand and all of them stood slowly, stiffly.

“M’lord, you should preside over this meeting,” the loyal old man said, bowing his gray head.

“I will, my old friend,” Dylan answered, “and I will let Tabea stay. I want all of you to know that she will be my wife when I take my rightful place again.” She bowed her head to hide the joyful red that was creeping into her face.

“First point, the traitor.” The young man suddenly looked at Tennek and held out a piece of cloth.

“Do you recognize this, Tennek?” The man blanched. “Answer me!”

“Yes.” His voice was almost inaudible.

“What is it?”

“A piece from my tunic. How did *you* get that?” Dylan smiled sadly.

“Argentis was none too gentle when he ripped that off your arm some days ago, as you were *leaving* the castle of Carrock. I smelled you the instant you walked by with Stev.” Suddenly Tennek drew his pistol.

“You are dead, you wolf-man,” he screamed and fired. The young lord fell to the ground, a hole in his tunic.

"I've got you now!" Tennek laughed.

"I don't think so." Dylan slowly regained his feet and opened his hand. The bullet was in it. "You happen to forget that in my human form I am immune to all weapons. Alick should have told you that you can only kill the *wolf*, not the wolf-man." He shook his head sadly as Poul and Enfer took the shocked man's arms and tied his hands behind his back.

"Alick knows who all of you are, my friends," the lord said quietly, "except for Tabea, but he has his sights set on getting her out of the way soon. I don't know how, but all of us must protect her and her farm."

"But what happened to you, sir?" Stev blurted, unable to contain his impatience.

"And what is this about a wolf?" Roche demanded. Dylan just picked up the lamp and hung it where it belonged, a hook dangling from the ceiling. Then he turned to the old man.

"Look at me." The brown eyes widened slowly, taking in the shaggy, gray hair on the lord's head and the beast-like eyes.

"I am the Wolf, Roche," he intoned gently. "I am the leader of the Gray Pack and the beast feared most by Alick the wizard."

"I always thought wolves were a wizard's friends," Enfer commented.

"No beast is a wizard's friend. The wizard bends the rules of power to his own ends. There are some wise ones, who use their powers as the Word has purposed them. But there are very few of them. The rest hoard the powers, pushing against the Word's Law. One day they step over it and are destroyed. I believe that has happened now."

"You mean *Alick* made you a wolf?" Pulleny asked. The lord nodded silently.

"I become human once a month, at full moon," he explained, "and during that time I cannot be harmed by any weapon -- only by a wizard's power." He bowed his head, leaning his weight on the rough table. "Listen, we are getting into some rough times," he said, looking into the circle. "Tennek will be silent until I can judge him openly. My will is growing weaker, but there is not much time until Alick's birthday. There are two more full moons before then. I have to find Savoy the Scholar. If any of you know where he is, please tell me. My whole plan hinges on that day, when Alick has his birthday. I hope -- no, I pray that I will have the knowledge of how to break the spell." He paused for a moment. "I want you to be ready on that day, with weapons and warriors. We might have to fight."

"Do you have a plan, Dylan?" Roche asked gently.

"Not yet, but I believe I will have one soon. Until then, no more meetings. Act -- well..." His face suddenly became sad. "Act like loyal subjects of Alick. It will make him less suspicious of you." He finally glanced out the window. The moon had run its course and was now behind the mountain.

"I have to go before the spell takes effect again." He bowed his head, as if under a great burden, then straightened. "Tennek, come here." The bound man came and stood before his lord.

"I am sorry to see that Alick had you in his councils. I had once thought you to be my best friend." He looked at the ground sadly. "Tennek, I too command some power, as was given to the Lords of Carrock." He looked up, his wolf-eyes boring into the other man's. "You will not be able to speak an intelligent word until I call you for judgment. This is for your good and for the good of all that are here. Understand?" Tennek nodded, hate in his eyes, and opened his mouth.

"Nga arrah sskth," was all that came. He stopped and tried it again, spouting even more horrible sounds, before he fell silent, the hate turning to astonishment and fear.

"I will see you all at the appointed time," Dylan said finally, turned, and left the hut. Tabea hurried out to see where he'd gone.

"Dylan!" she screamed.

"Remember the whistle! I'll be there for you, lady love!" she heard from the woods and then he was gone. A gentle hand rested on her shoulder. Stev looked away to where the shadow had been.

"He will be back, my dear cousin," he whispered.

"I hope so," she answered with a sob.



A LICK STARED AT A LARGE MAP hanging over the fireplace in the library. It had been drawn by Martyn á Carrock, Dylan's grandfather. A strange breed, the Lords of Carrock, he mused silently. No one knew where they'd come from and they had always been just, all fifteen of them, until old Colyn took a second woman, just as the wizard had planned it. He chuckled and rubbed his hands together. Then it was an easy thing to enchant Dylan, who did not know of his power, but that still didn't solve the mystery of the Lords of Carrock. He knew that they also had some power, minimal, but enough to be impressive. It was theirs to command by birth, as if the Word himself had given them the power -- just like the Scholars, those strange men, so much like wizards, and yet not using their powers for anything but the good of others, and then rarely.

"..., how I hate them!" he growled, turning from the map. He'd tried vainly to find Savoy, the greatest of the Scholars, but the proverb had proven true, "A Scholar is harder to find by a malicious heart, than a sea is emptied with a spoon." The wizard spat in the fire, looking back at the map. There was Carrock, now *his* lands, but the firm grip he'd established was shaking, he knew it. The Wolf was back and the Gray Pack with him. There were traitors among the people, who would much rather be ruled by Dylan than by the great wizard. What were two years of power, two years of lordship anyway? Just a mere trifle in contrast to the hundreds of years that the Lords of Carrock had ruled. It was *nothing*.

"I've labored so long for this," he whispered. Now the priceless gem he'd imagined was crumbling in his grasp like a clump of dry earth. The strings were coming loose. New ones must be tied, tighter than the old. The first one must be the elimination of the girl. She was the main threat now, the base of Dylan's power. Alick grinned to himself. Yes, this would be fun, and maybe, just *maybe* Onri would get his way out of it, too.

A sharp rapping on the huge doors made him turn.

"Come!" he called and waved his hand. The doors swung open by themselves. Onri and two guards were there, holding a disheveled fourth man. They marched him to the middle of the room and stopped, bowing slightly.

"What is it?" the wizard wanted to know. The men straightened.

"Sir, we have finally found Tennek," Onri announced. *Ah, our little discussion has knocked some sense into that fool*, Alick grinned to himself. Now it was "sir" again and the shrill tenor was smoother, more military-like.

"Well, what does he say?"

"Nothing, sir. He can't speak." The wizard walked forward and lifted the traitor's chin with his hands.

"Where have you been, Tennek? It's been five days since the meeting."

"Maarh gnah roohr," was all the man answered.

"Can't you speak?" The man shook his head. Alick let go of his chin.

"Dylan!" The word exploded like a curse and was followed by a long line of obscenities, dealing mainly with the canine origins of the young lord's mother.

"He still has the power!" the wizard shrieked. He turned to the white-faced men. "Get out, all of you." They turned and scampered out of the room.

"Onri!" The beau stopped and came in, bowing and muttering to himself. Alick grabbed his bow tie and pulled him up so close that his reeking breath poured over the flashy young man's face.

"Get the best men you have. We will be taking what Dylan treasures most and perhaps you may get your pleasure after all. Hurry up, because I'm going with you." He shoved Onri back, making him fall flat on his behind. He jumped up and ran out of the room, followed by the insane ravings of the wizard.

The day was cloudy and a chill wind washed over the land, even though summer had already begun. The crows were out. Some of the more superstitious folk were talking about evil omens. The Gray Pack stopped the mating, huddling down among the ferns and trees of the wood. The Wolf was absent again and none knew where he was.

Slowly, the gates of the castle opened and a line of seasoned gunmen rode out, headed by a figure in blackish-blue robes with a golden crown on his head. He was directly followed by a stiff Onri, for once not dressed in those gaudy red colors, but in the same gray-brown as the other soldiers. A chill passed over all those who watched. Dogs barked madly and the cats ran from the streets, screaming. The only birds in the air were the crows. This truly was an evil day.



Tabea had already finished her work in the garden and with the animals in the morning and was now going about making her famous butter. She looked away from the pleasant fire to the window. The clouds were dark, foreboding. Her hand left the stick of the butter churn and felt for the pistol lying close at hand. She picked it up for the umpteenth time and checked to see if it was loaded. She just couldn't shake that feeling. The instant she put the gun down, her hand flew to her neck, where the small whistle hung. She knew she'd feel safer if Dylan were here, if she could snuggle into that thick, smelly fur and let him watch the farm for her. But, no, she would stand her ground, she knew it. After all, she'd done it more than once, even when Onri had come with several friends. This would be no different, right? And yet, it *was* different. The foreboding she felt would not go away, no matter how hard she rammied the stick up and down in the butter churn. She looked in to see how the progress was doing, but she'd only just started. Slowly she started to chant, the stick moving up and down rhythmically.

"The Word holds the world in his hand. He helps all the weak of this land. He breaks the power of the evil lords. They flee at the thunder of his words." At the word "thunder" the front door suddenly caved in, as if it had been struck by a great rock. The girl leaped to her feet, fingers curling around the hilt of her gun. She was shaking so hard, she could hardly hold it steady at the black-robed figure in the doorway.

"Alick!" she whispered and then continued in a louder voice. "What do you want?" She couldn't keep the trembling out.

"Put the gun down, *now!*" came the command. She complied instantly, her other hand fumbling for the whistle.

"I have come to take you to where you belong, Tabea," he continued, his voice like a shard of glass.

"I belong here, waiting," she tried to answer bravely. The wizard advanced a step, his brown eyes menacing.

"You don't. You belong where *I* say you belong. You are coming with me!" Her fingers finally closed around the small device. She could almost feel the assurance of Dylan's presence. In a swift move she put it to her mouth and blew. No sound was heard from it, but a good ways away, the Wolf cocked his head, turned, and charged off through the wood.

Alick reached forward and yanked the whistle out of her mouth in the same move ripping the chain away from her throat. A deep red welt began to burn its way to the surface of her neck.

"So, you will resist, will you?" he cried, menace in his voice. Suddenly something in the girl snapped and she leaped forward, face contorted in rage, fingers clawing at the face of the wizard. He shoved her back, not letting go of her dress, but making a huge tear in the front of it. She tore away from him, leaving part of the fabric in his hand and then attacked again. In the same instant his hand shot out, striking her across the side of her face. She fell to the ground, dazed and dizzy. Suddenly it was as if she'd had her limbs torn off and replaced again in the wrong places. She jumped to her feet, but on all fours. A sharp hissing came from between her teeth, rounded black ears laid back, blue eyes burning with anger and hate. She leaped up and one huge black paw shot forward, amber claws extended. It caught the wizard on the shoulder, hurling him to the ground. She continued on her momentum, flying out the door and through the group of men, who vainly tried to catch her, out into the woods.



**T**WILIGHT WAS SETTLING OVER THE FOREST. Dylan moodily trotted back from the farm. He'd come too late. The front door was shattered. Tabea and the men were gone. The only things he'd found were a piece of cloth from her dress and the torn chain of the whistle. And there was that stench -- the smell of Alick, the wizard. He growled quietly to himself, the green eyes smoldering. He knew that if he met Alick in this form, he would not be able to control his instincts and would kill the man. It would be the end of a lot of pain, but not of the enchantment, he was sure of that. *I can only confront him in my human form*, he decided. *That's the only time when my mind really rules over my guts*. He trotted on, heading for the Gray Pack again. The heat was over, the wolf-maids having found their mates. Soon there would be more pups to take care of, but he, Dylan, would not be there to do so again. By that time he would be free from his enchantment.

A fresh scent caught his delicate nose. No, he hadn't smelled that before, or had he? It reminded him of Tabea, only much wilder. He put his nose to the ground, following silently. His human mind now supplemented the instincts with a double watchfulness. The gray world around him would dislodge its secrets soon enough. He

continued on, noticing that he was going in the general direction of his block hut. For a man it would be a good four-hour hike. A wolf might make it in two, if he were moving quickly, but this was no wolf. He knew that. The scent had a different quality -- a bit like a common house-cat's, but still *very* different from that. Suddenly he stopped, sensing that he was being watched. He continued with his nose to the ground, purposely turning from his trail, back into the ferns. As soon as he was certain that the feeling had vanished, he turned back, slinking among the trees. The green eyes had become curious now. He crouched down, surveying the trees around him. A stray ray of the setting sun pierced the thick leaves and rested on a dark shape calmly reclining in the boughs of one of the trees. The green eyes narrowed slightly, slowly recognizing it. It was a large cat, contentedly washing its glossy black fur. These black panthers were thought to be dead, he remembered. Where did this one come from? The Wolf slowly began to sense the challenge of an exciting fight rising in him. He sprang up and gave a loud howl. The cat started, leaping to its feet, ready for the pounce.

Suddenly, it came, amber claws unsheathed, blue eyes livid. He leaped to the side, letting it land on the ground. His fangs were showing now, the green eyes menacing. The large cat drew back one huge paw, baring the claws again, but suddenly let it drop to the ground, straightening up and purring softly. The dark tail flicked back and forth in the underbrush. The sudden lack of fight in this animal shocked him, calming his boiling blood. For an instant he thought it was talking to him, it sounded almost like it had said his name.

"Who are you?" he yipped in wolf-tongue. The cat just purred and came closer. He almost wanted to turn and run. The furry face closed in on his and for an instant their noses touched. The cat sat back and looked at him. Finally the truth struck him -- Tabea! She'd been enchanted, too. There was all of her air around this beast. It smelled like she did, though a bit different -- more wild, perhaps. He let his tongue hang out to cool off a bit and looked at her thoughtfully. She would not understand wolf-speech, but he would have to take care of her anyway. She had plenty of fight in her and he knew that. She could take care of herself, but these black panthers were very rare and someone would be likely to kill her if she were alone. Best let her join the Pack. It was only two months anyway, before the spell would break and she'd become human once more. They would have to bide their time.

He rose slowly and looked back at her, his eyes inviting her to follow. He then turned and walked off. The Cat leaped to her feet and with two silent bounds was beside the Wolf. Together they melted into the darkness of the coming night.

The wolves were restless that night. Dylan knew that the heat was over. Why wasn't he coming? Yashira, the leader of the wolf-maids, was angry again and Brownie was quite certain that he couldn't control her.

"It was a mistake taking him as our leader," she barked at him. "You should depose him *now*, while the time is ripe. Maybe then he'll get some sense in his head."

"And mate with you?" Brownie's yips were ironic. "Don't be a woman, Yashira. You are a wolf, and a lot smarter than that." The other just growled at him, her golden eyes narrowing.

"If you weren't my brother, I swear I'd kill you, Brownie, and Dylan would not be able to stop me."

"Your being a wolf-maid and pregnant will make no difference to him, when he finds me dead and my blood on *your* fangs. You saw what he did to Scarface." She slowly began to circle him menacingly.

"That was the only time he showed his strength. He is nothing but a weakling, not wanting one of his own pups to rule the Pack when he is gone. He is a weakling, I tell you!"

"Really? Then perhaps you misunderstand me, Yashira." In the heated conversation neither of the wolves had noticed their leader's arrival.

"Then make me understand," the wolf-maid snapped, unruffled at the sudden appearance.

"You know that I am enchanted. Brownie has told you so. If we look at it from *my* point of view I'm being strong, not weak." Dylan took a few steps towards her, making her retreat.

"You are nothing but a man!" she snapped.

"You're right and I have no intention ending as your grandfather did. He was turned into a wolf as well and you know that." His barking was slowly becoming more threatening. Yashira saw the angry look in his eye and suddenly rolled on her back, bearing her neck. Dylan gently closed his teeth around the soft fur, signifying that he accepted her apology and subordination. He stepped back, beside the black Cat that the rest of the Pack was nosing around. She just calmly lay on the ground, blue eyes half shut, purring contentedly. Yashira rolled back to her feet and stared at the intruder.

“What is *that* doing here?” she howled.

“That is also an enchanted beast. It happens to be a woman called Tabea. Show her respect.” The Wolf’s tone was a measured yip. “She will be staying with us for some time.”

“You can’t be serious!” the wolf-maid growled back.

“I am and now be quiet or I might *not* accept your apology.” He then looked around at all of his wolves and gave a solitary howl.

“We are leaving this place, get ready.” The Pack complied silently. The big Cat fell in line with the Wolf.

“We have work to do,” he growled, more to himself.

“Then let’s do it,” the Cat purred back. It sounded like someone speaking with a heavy foreign accent.

“Tabea -- you --”

“Can understand most of what you say, *if* you speak slowly. That was rather fast back there, but I got the gist of everything. Cat-tongue is not so different from wolf-speech as you imagine.” The Wolf smiled and howled into the night. The others imitated him, Tabea’s bright blue eyes staring at the waning moon through the trees.



**W**ILL’S TAVERN WAS FULL AGAIN. It had been an exciting night and everyone wanted to hear the bartender’s summary of what had happened. The tankards of ale were still being passed out. Stev Pulleny was absent for once, saying that he had something to tend to that night. Old Roche pensively nipped at his drink, with no real appetite for either beer or a well-told story.

“Hey, Will,” Poul called from his table, where he’d wrapped his arms around one of the pretty girls. “Tell us about what happened with the Pack again.”

“Okay, okay,” the barkeep laughed and leaned his heavyset form on the counter. “I think they were raiding the village just west of here...”

...The torches blazed brightly against the sky. Cries of men and women were heard as Alick’s ruthless soldiers went looking for traitors. The only thing they found were a bunch of peasants, some of them with rather pretty daughters, and more than one of these was violated before her parents’ eyes. One of the girls had pressed herself behind the door, her heart flying like a drum that had lost its rhythm. She prayed a mile a minute, hoping that some god would hear her. Cold sweat broke out as she heard the noise of the soldiers coming closer. Suddenly a big, brutish man broke into the house, his torch lighting up the whole room. The girl looked around frantically for a way to escape. In the same instant the big man spotted her and lunged for her. She tried to slip away, but he caught her nightgown. Unfortunately for her it was well made and did not rip. He dragged her back and out into the gloomy night.

“I think we’ll have a bit of fun together,” he laughed.

“No, please, please don’t!” she cried, but it was smothered by his cruel lips. She tried to pull herself away from him as he forced her to the ground, tearing at her nightgown. He leaned back for just an instant and was suddenly hurled off her. A huge black cat was crouched beside the girl. The soldier leaped to his feet, the left side of his face in shreds. The Cat hissed and bared its fangs. Her adversary was fumbling for his gun, but she was quicker. In an instant she leaped on him, razor sharp claws extended. They cut deep into his shoulders, blood coloring his clothing red. The Cat fell back to the ground, but raised itself up once more, raking its left paw across his neck. He pulled away just in time, so the claws only touched his skin, making relatively little damage. The battle with the Cat had destroyed any interest of his in the girl and he fled into the night.

The big beast turned back to the girl and touched her forehead with its rough, pink tongue. She ran her shaking hands through the glossy fur and hugged the animal. The blue eyes remained watchful, before Tabea prodded the girl back to her feet and into the big house.

The commander of soldiers was just about to “execute” an elderly man, who was unfortunate enough to be related to Stev Pulleny.

“Tell me where that brat is!” the soldier screamed.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the old man wailed, “I haven’t seen him in months.”

“You lie!” He drew his gun and pointed it at the fearful hazel eyes. “You’ve just lived your last day, old man.” His finger tightened on the trigger. In the same instant sharp teeth closed around his wrist, cutting into the skin. He looked to see the angry green eyes of the Wolf staring at him. He tried to shake his wrist free, but the pressure of the jaws just increased. He dropped the pistol, madly watching his blood run from between the beast’s ivory fangs.

“Please, don’t kill me, let me go,” he cried, falling to his knees. Tears rolled down his cheeks. “I don’t want to die, please.” The Wolf growled and opened his jaws. The man was shocked to see pity in its eyes. He gave a sharp yip and looked at the old man, who jumped up and rushed in the house to get some bandages. While the big beast guarded the soldier, Stev Pulleny’s relative washed and bandaged the bite.

“I hope you don’t have rabies,” the impromptu physician whispered to the Wolf. Dylan just smiled calmly and when the old man was finished, he nudged the commander to stand up. The fearful man complied and slowly walked towards the center of the village, where the Gray Pack had made quick work of most of his men. Several of the rough ones were pinned to the ground by huge wolves one man’s face had nearly been destroyed by some kind of sharp object -- possibly claws. Aside from the nearly fifty wolves, who were keeping the men in check, there was one large Cat coming out of the shadows, followed by a very pretty girl with a cloak over her shoulders to hide her torn nightgown. The villagers were standing around, the weapons of the soldiers in their hands. Suddenly the commander realized that the *wolves were keeping his men from being killed!*

“Sir, I don’t know how I can thank you,” he said, turning to the Wolf. “You’ve spared my life and that of my men. I know we deserve to die. If you were human, I’d rather have you as a lord than the old wizard.” Dylan just looked at him with a queer glint in his eye and something like a smile on his furry lips. He then turned and yipped at the wolves. They rounded up the soldiers and slowly marched them out of the village, the Wolf and the Cat leaving last of all...

...”It’s almost too incredible to be true,” Will closed slowly, “and I wouldn’t have believed it, if the commander hadn’t been here himself to show me his wounds. It seems to me that he’s changed quite a bit. He’s a lot nicer now and *against* the old wizard.” He stood up and ran his cloth over the bar. “Now it’s someone else’s turn,” he finished with a laugh.

Old Roche stared at his still half-full mug and smiled to himself *Dylan hasn’t changed*, he thought. *He still has that same effect on people, just like when he was a kid.* He chuckled quietly and raised his cup to his lips.



**F**EARLY EVENING WAS SETTLING AGAIN and Tabea had decided that she wanted to take a short snooze in the bough of a tall tree some ways away from the pack. Something inside her was moving, even though she didn’t know what it was. Just an uneasiness, as if something special was about to happen. It reminded her of the times when Dylan came to visit her. Shortly before he arrived, after all the work was done and she had made herself pretty, when she had nothing left to do, the expectation of his coming was thick in the air, making it impossible to sit down and do *anything* for even a minute. Even through the cool, collected feline nature of her enchanted form, she was giddy. What was going to happen? Why did she feel like this?

She stared down from the bough of the tree she was reclining in and suddenly noticed that the Wolf was slowly walking away from the others. Curiosity pricked her and she silently bounded from her comfortable perch to another tree some ways away. Then came the next tree, and the next. She finally decided that going along the ground would be easier and launched herself out of the branches and onto the small path that Dylan was following. The going was not easy, even for a Cat, but she somehow managed to follow him as he moved quickly through the woods.

The terrain was changing, becoming more rocky. Until now she’d been able to hide herself from the probing green eyes of the Wolf as he looked back. She knew that he’d sensed her following him. The trees had thinned out and she was quite certain that they were close to the promontory overlooking the Lands of Carrock. The Wolf stopped and gazed up at the fingers of the sun that were still clinging to the sides of the mountain. Then he looked east and eyed the place where he knew the full moon would be rising. He threw his head back in a solitary howl. Tabea could sense his melancholy attitude as she crouched among some large rocks.

The sun went down and suddenly she felt like her arms and legs were filled with pins and needles, pricking her in all places. There was also a strange sense of freedom, like when your hands were untied from behind your back and you were let go. She pushed herself back, rearing up on her hind paws and suddenly stood straight and tall, no longer a cat, but a beautiful woman clad in what seemed to be a singlet of cat skin. Her arms and legs were bare as was her neck and a small part of her chest just below it, forming a decently cut collar. The soft fur came down just a short way down the top of her legs. It was not immodest, but it would pass more for an undergarment than as a dress she'd want to wear in public. She sighed and brushed one hand against it, staring out to where the Wolf had been. She just noticed Dylan's tall figure standing there before he turned and saw her.

"It's full moon," was all he said. She nodded and he quickly whisked down to the side of the hill to his hiding place. A few moments later he returned, dressed in the tunic and trousers, the cloak over his arm. He stepped up to her and gently laid it around her shoulders.

"That should do for now, but we have to get some real clothes for you." She nodded slowly.

"Let's go to your farm," he suggested. "Stev will be waiting for us there."

"Really?" she asked, speaking clearly for the first time since her enchantment. "How does he know about that?"

"Haven't you guessed?" he asked, giving her a gentle look of reproach. "Stev *can* talk to animals and understand them. He's been looking for Savoy for me."

"Isn't that dangerous?" He shrugged.

"Yes, but he knows how to do it without gathering any suspicion."

"Oh." They continued their way in silence.

Stev was sitting uncomfortably at the table of Tabea's empty house. He'd repaired the door and his little sister had come to take care of the chickens. The cows were now at his farm. The house itself was in good condition, carefully cleaned and set in order by his mother once a week. Tabea would be happy to see it again -- *if* she was alive.

He remembered the short talk he'd had with Dylan two days after the meeting.

"Find me Savoy," the Wolf had commanded. And Stev had. It hadn't been easy, but he'd done it. Dylan would be really happy tonight. There was a quiet rapping on the door that shocked him out of his reverie.

"Come!" he called, rising to his feet. The door swung open and Dylan walked in, followed by a slightly smaller figure with black hair. Pulleny blinked twice before recognizing the pale face of the woman with the cat-eyes.

"Tabea, you're alive!" he cried and rushed forward to hug her. She didn't resist it, but he also sensed that she was very uncomfortable about it.

"Are you okay?"

"It's -- it's just this enchantment," she sighed. "I'm going to get some real clothes on." With that she disappeared into the small bedroom and closed the door after her.

"How's she taking it?" Stev wanted to know. Dylan sighed, sitting down across from him.

"Okay, I guess. This is the first time she's been human and when she realizes..." He trailed off sadly. "It's just going to be very hard on her. She's a lot more sensitive than I am." He sighed to himself. "Sometimes I wish I could give her some of my strength of mind." He shook his head and then regarded his young friend carefully.

"I've found him," he said with a laugh. Dylan instantly leaned forward.

"Where?"

"He's living a good ways east of here in Wiston. Four or five days on a horse if you really push it. You should be able to do it in maybe a week." The wolf-man leaned back and put his head down, stroking his chin thoughtfully. Pulleny could almost hear the complicated circuits clicking audibly.

"One week," Dylan mused. "It might *just* work. It will be murder on me. I hope Tabea will stay here."

"Why?" She just came out of the back room in time to hear what he'd said. He reached out and took her hand.

"Lady love, I've got to go away to the east and it will be very hard traveling, even for a wolf. I know that I will be nearly dead when I arrive back here, because Alick's birthday is only six days after full moon this year. If I leave Wiston before sunrise, I'll make it to the promontory an hour before sunset, but only if I can move

unhindered.” He put up his free hand to shush her protest. “I want you to stay with Pulleny and protect them, Tabea. They will need someone strong there, who isn’t afraid of Alick. Will you do that?” The wolf-eyes stared into the blue depths of hers for a long moment. She nervously shoved at her long, tangled, black hair. Then she dropped his gaze.

“Yes, Dylan, I will -- if --” She looked away.

“If I stay with you as long as possible?” A quiet nod.

“All right, lady love, I will stay for a week, but then I really must leave, so that I can save my strength for the fast return. Is that okay with you, Stev?” He just nodded with a bright smile on his face.

“Good.” The young lord was smiling thoughtfully. “I have one more thing to tend to before the night is up. I’ve got to go back to the promontory. When I get back, I want to talk with Tabea alone.” Stev nodded and got up to leave.

“See you in the morning,” he yawned. “It’s still a good way to the farm from here and my mother will be waiting. Anyway, I’ve got a bed to go to.”

About an hour and a half later Dylan returned to the farm. Tabea was sitting there forlornly picking at the arm of her mother’s rocking chair. The big man entered silently and pulled a chair up across from her.

“It’s hard isn’t it?” he asked sadly. She nodded, the tears nearly spilling over.

“I can’t understand it, Dylan, but --” A silent sob shook her body. “-- but I can’t love you anymore. Not the way it was before Alick did this to us.” She pressed both fists into her eyes. “It’s like -- like trying to love an animal. You feel affection and maybe -- care for it, but nothing more, nothing like we had.” Suddenly the sobs broke out loud. She couldn’t control her shaking anymore. He reached out and pulled her to him, like a father comforts a crying child.

“Now you know how I felt all those nights when I thought of you, lady love,” he told her, his own voice cracking. “There’s nothing I miss more than that sense of belonging.”

“Why couldn’t I be a wolf, too, why?” she demanded, pounding at his broad chest.

“It’s your character.” His voice was smooth again, though his eyes still showed his pain. “You are free, wild, cunning and smooth, just like a cat. My character is like that of a wolf, that’s why I am what I am and that’s why you are what you are. It’s hard to realize how different we are, but that’s the way we were born -- and look, we’re still together.” She nodded almost invisibly.

“Now, do you want me to carry you to the Pulleny’s?” he asked gently. “We should get there before sunrise.”

“No, I’ll walk,” she said, her voice resolute. They left the house a few minutes later, hurrying into the night, just two black shadows in a world of even less light. The full moon was hidden behind the clouds now, making them invisible to all who were going along.

“Tabea,” he whispered, catching her attention, “I have to tell you something.”

“What?” She sounded breathless.

“In one month and one week, we will be fully human for one day and two nights -- I mean fully human, nothing about this enchantment bit. Your feelings are free, too, but that can be *very* dangerous. You will have to control yourself until after the enchantment is broken.” She nodded silently and they pressed on for a while.

“What’s it like to suddenly have your feelings free again,” she finally asked.

“Like a landslide, very hard to control, but easy to get out of the way. That’s what you should do, get out of the way!” She nodded again. Slowly her movements were beginning to feel unnatural. The enchantment was taking over again, she knew it. There were only a few hours left. She stumbled and fell with a cry and suddenly found herself swept up in Dylan’s strong arms. His jaw was set and he suddenly increased his pace to a run. *Only an hour, must hurry!* Suddenly they broke from the forest on the edge of the Pulleny’s farm. It was dark and seemed empty. He sighed, set her on her feet and began pulling off his clothing. She did the same and then they waited. Suddenly she gasped and fell forward on all fours. The pain, it was all she could think about. She threw back her head and a mournful cat-scream came from her black lips. In an instant it was gone, but she still felt unnatural.

“It will go away soon,” the Wolf said quietly. He gathered his clothes carefully in his teeth and padded into the yard, finally lying down and resting on the porch. The sun rose on them from behind the clouds. Tabea turned

her blue eyes to the shine and for the first time in her life despised its light, knowing what it had stolen from her. She stared out towards the north, where Alick's castle lay. He was going to pay when she got her claws on him.



NIGHT WAS SETTLING ON THE LONE WOLF. He had come a far way. It was slow going to conserve his energies, but he still felt so tired. He'd left part of his heart back there, with that girl he loved. The week had passed too quickly for him. And even though his feelings were "maimed," he still enjoyed the times better than ever. Prisca Pulleny had been an ever-present companion to the enchanted people and had done much to lighten their hearts. Still, the gravity of what Dylan had to do struck him heavily. He remembered the second night after full moon, when he'd returned to the Gray Pack and given the leadership to Brownie. The new lord of the wolves pledged everlasting fidelity to the Lords of Carrock and all but Yashira were delighted. She was an odd-ball anyway and Dylan had a bad feeling about her. Traitor? Possibly, but not certain. Brownie was told to keep an eye on her.

Then, as the week ended, he had a quick talk with Stev.

"Have Tabea meet me at the promontory six days after full moon," he'd said quietly. "And make sure that she brings some clothes for herself." The young man nodded and then Dylan had turned and vanished into the forest. That was nearly three weeks ago. It was two days until full moon and he still had a good ways to go. He would have to reach the city gates before dusk. Press on, press on.

Night passed into dawn and now he could see the pinnacles and shining roofs of the city through the high trees. He'd be there by the afternoon if he moved quickly. Good, ahead of time. He came to the end of the woods, overlooking the clear, clean valley. Water flowed from a low grille in the city walls. It was crystal clear and clean, filling a small pond some ways away from where he was standing. He looked up at the sky. It was early afternoon yet. He could take a quick rest. He reached over his shoulder with his head and bit through the principal rope holding the bundle of clothes he'd been wearing on his back. A light shake and they fell on the ground next to him. He lay down in the soft grass and closed his eyes, resting and yet watchful.

A rustling behind him made him look around. His stomach was growling now. It had been four days since his last meal, and that had been very little. He silently rose and nosed through the high grass. Suddenly laughter touched his sensitive ears. What -- children? Here? The keen wolf-eyes peered through the plants and there he saw them, two girls and a boy, probably between six and nine years of age. They were dressed in white and playing happily among the tall grasses, oblivious to the fact that day was nearly over and that the Wolf was watching them. Perhaps they could help him get in the city. He glanced towards the setting sun. It would be dark very soon and then he could speak to them like a human being. He growled to himself impatiently and returned to get the pack of clothing. He sat there, staring at the city, and yet listening to the happiness of the children behind him. They had no idea of the evil grasp of the wizard many miles to the north and west.

The sun now hurried to its resting place and vanished. In the same instant the Wolf rose to become a man again. He could hear the whimpering of the children behind him. He threw on his clothes and turned towards where they were. The three of them were huddled together, the youngest girl crying quietly. They were staring towards the woods, as if afraid of what was going to come from there.

"I knew we should have obeyed Mom," the older girl was saying importantly.

"Will you shut up, Lea?!" the boy snapped back. "If you hadn't suggested it, we wouldn't have come out here in the first place. Now the gates are probably shut. We'll have to sleep here tonight."

"And what about the wolf that was seen near here a few days ago?" Lea returned, slowly heating up. At the mention of the beast, the smaller girl wailed, wrapping her arms around herself and shaking violently.

"He won't hurt you," came a quiet and gentle voice behind them. The boy jumped to his feet, fists raised.

"Who are you?" he demanded, staring at the tall stranger in front of him.

"I'm a friend," the man answered. "My name is Dylan." He knelt beside the shaking girl and laid one hand on her small shoulder. The wailing turned to a whimpering, that slowly subsided as she reached out and put her arms around the big man. Dylan picked her up and held her to his chest. Then he reached out with his free hand.

"Come on, I'll take you home," he told them. For some reason they weren't afraid of him any more. Lea took his hand in hers and her brother walked beside the wolf-man.

“What is your name, big guy?” the young lord asked.

“I’m Brendan,” he returned. “And that’s my big sister Lea and my little sister Lora.”

“Do your parents live in the city?” The two older kids nodded. “What were you doing out here?”

“Playing,” Lea answered a bit lamely.

“You see, we weren’t supposed to leave the city today,” the boy explained self-consciously. “The farmers have seen some wolves around the area.”

“Some wolves?” Dylan asked, suddenly interested.

“Yes, one of them is really big with a white spot on his chest. The other one is normal sized and has more white than gray and a black line running along her nose and up between her eyes, at least that’s what my Dad said.”

“Yashira!” the wolf-man muttered to himself.

“Do you know them?” Lea asked. Dylan nodded emphatically.

“I do. The big wolf won’t hurt anyone, but the little one could be dangerous.” He bowed his head in deep thought and for a long time they walked in silence. They had nearly reached the city gates and these were slowly closing. A young couple was dejectedly turning back to the large gates, hand in hand.

“Daddy! Mommy!” Lea suddenly screamed, tore herself away from Dylan’s gentle hand and rushed up to the couple. The woman knelt and put her arms around her daughter. Brendan just continued walking with the big man until they reached the parents.

“Come quickly,” the man was saying, “or we’ll be shut out.” All six of them hurried up and through the gates just in time. Moments later they closed with a crash.

“Well, here we are again,” the father said, trying to be stern, but elation sparkling in his eyes. “And you, young man and young woman, are in *big* trouble, but I’m happy that you made it home.” The woman turned to Dylan, who offered Lora back to her. The little girl laughed and clung to her mother.

“Thank you, sir,” the mother said with a glowing smile. “We thought the wolf would get our kids.”

“Actually, he did,” Dylan answered with a smile. “I am called the Wolf. But perhaps you can help me. I’m looking for Savoy the Scholar. Could you point me to his house?” The man looked at him surprised.

“I *am* Savoy, called the Scholar,” he answered. “Who are you?”

“I am Dylan á Carrock.” The Scholar regarded him thoughtfully for a moment.

“Very well, your highness, come with me.”

The fire in Savoy’s room blazed quietly. Dylan was now sitting in a comfortable chair, a large glass of clear water beside him, while the Scholar tended to the fire. This gave the wolf-man a few moments to observe him. He was a bit smaller than Dylan and his hair was like coal. His swarthy skin told of southerly origins. His beard was well-kept and his brown eyes carefully watched the flames until they leaped the way he wanted. Slowly he stood and brushed his hands over his white robes. There was a small round cap on his head that he now laid aside. He then bowed slightly to the young lord, before taking a seat in an ancient chair. He now regarded the wolf-man, not saying a word. Finally Dylan broke the silence.

“I have heard a lot about you and am very glad to meet you, sir.” The Scholar smiled.

“If it hadn’t been for your wizard’s successful plans, I believe we would have seen each other much sooner, Lord Dylan.” He made a lavish gesture with one hand. “The Lords of Carrock and the Scholars have always been closely acquainted.”

“Is that so? My father told me he’d never met you before, but he’d heard about your being great when *he* was quite young. I would guess that you are quite old by now.” Savoy allowed himself a quiet chuckle.

“Your father heard about my grandfather, after whom I’m named. I am not quite as great as he was, but I am still a Scholar and I would be glad to put my knowledge to your service.” His eyes narrowed slightly. “I believe, Lord Dylan, that you are enchanted.”

“Why -- yes, how did you know?” It was all he do to keep from gaping at this gentle man.

“Your eyes, your hair, and the whole air around you speaks of it. I also know that you want to find out how to break this enchantment. Very well, I will show you.” He rose and turned to a low table covered with a white cloth. He pulled it off carefully to display several small devices. Two were artfully carved and painted wooden statuettes of animals. One was a wolf, the other a cat. Behind both of these lay a clear crystal ball on a black velvet blanket. Savoy picked it up carefully.

“These are exact replicas of the things found in Alick’s den,” he explained. “These are representatives of his power over you and your lady.”

“How did you find them and how do you know about me -- and Tabea?” Now the young lord couldn’t keep his mouth shut. The other just smiled gently.

“My lord, I am a Scholar and the Word has blessed me with a very close relationship with him. He told me about your problems and he took me to Alick’s tower room and showed me all these things. He is the one who deserves credit for your disenchantment, Lord Dylan, he and no other. Now watch!” He weighed the crystal ball in his hand for an instant and then hurled it into the flames. There was an explosion and the flames glinted with a bluish light for an instant. As the white and black spots in front of Dylan’s eyes cleared, he could see the Scholar pointing to the two figurines. They had blackened and turned to ashes. Savoy’s face was grim.

“Destroy the center of his power, Dylan á Carrock. It must happen this year, or else you will not be able to stand against the instincts of the wolf. You have only one chance. Do not waste it.”

“Is that all I have to do, sir?” he asked incredulously.

“Yes, but you can’t do it in your own strength, Lord Dylan. The Word will assist you. You already have his power in you as a descendant of the Lords of Carrock, whom the Word himself sent from the North to protect the people of these lands. You have that power and that authority, but they must be under the Word’s authority to work. You have already used it justly -- on Tennek.” The Scholar smiled at Dylan’s surprised face. “Oh, yes, I know all about that from the Word. It was correct, as was what you did to your father, even though that hurt you.” Dylan bowed his head silently. Savoy took his seat again.

“Thank you very much, sir,” the young lord finally said. “I have to go now if I want to make it back to the promontory on time.” The other nodded.

“Drink your water first, lord of Carrock, it will give you strength,” he advised. “And one more thing, think twice about bringing your father and his wife back to Carrock. She is more dangerous than you realize.” Dylan nodded and did as he was told. He finished the pure, clear tasting water and rose. Suddenly he remembered.

“And Yashira?” The Scholar rose, smiling gravely.

“She won’t bother you anymore. She’s dead, shot by one of the hunters this afternoon.” He placed one hand on the young lord’s shoulder. “Don’t be sad about her my friend. She was a wolf and not a very noble one. Now,” he continued taking a ring from his finger, “give this to the man at the gate, he will open it for you and you will be on your way.”

“Thank you for everything, sir,” Dylan said as they stood at the front door.

“I’m glad I could help.”

“Will I see you and your family again?”

“Perhaps. We might come to Carrock for your wedding.” Savoy the Scholar reached out and placed his right hand on the wolf-man’s head. “The blessings of the Word go with you and his wisdom rest upon you for all times. Be assured, he will open your way and give you success. Go in peace.” Dylan bowed and left the Scholar’s house, finally sure that he would see the enchantment broken -- maybe not in his own strength, but broken and that was all that mattered.



**T**OLD WIND PUSHED ITS WAY past the tightly closed shutters of Alick’s dismal den. The fire crackled, throwing odd shadows on the wall. Only two people were in the room. The taller was Onri, his dark eyes glittering in the dim light. Alick sat motionless in his high, black chair, eyes focused on a point beyond the walls. The younger man impatiently shifted his weight, watching his mentor in agitation. The wizard’s spirit was far and wide, searching for something. Far away, the Wolf was running west.

Suddenly the chest of the wizard swelled out in a calm breath. He expelled the air, eyes clearing. He registered Onri’s impatient glare complacently, rising and pouring himself a goblet of wine, which he drained before settling down in his chair and regarding his apprentice again.

“Dylan has found the Scholar, I believe,” he began slowly. “I cannot find him anywhere in Carrock, but I have discovered where Tabea is hiding.”

“So, will you disenchant her?” the beau asked eagerly. The wizard shook his head.

“No, because she first has to consent to becoming your woman and you know she won’t do that.”

“Even if freedom from enchantment is the prize?”

“Even then.” The wizard sighed. “Women are a lot more complicated than you think, especially when they are loyal to their men. If they are crazy, loose like your girls, then it is no problem to control them, but once they decide they will spend their *whole* life with someone and that someone promises the same to them ... it becomes very difficult. But now,” the philosophical tone left his voice, “we must prepare for his arrival. Stay away from the Pullenys. We must capture them in their human forms when my birthday arrives. That is the only day when I have no power whatsoever, but it is also the only day when Dylan á Carrock will venture to challenge me. I will be ready for him and so will you. Don’t let the women distract you, Onri, or else it will be your death.” He fell silent, brooding over his plans. And far away, the Wolf ran on.

The large black Cat was lying on the porch, quietly waiting. Three days since full moon. She was already sensing a change beginning in her. It was the same yearning she’d felt shortly before the freedom of full moon. She remembered joking and laughing with Stev and his family that night. They had all rested late into the day. Rest -- that was all she’d done that month. No action, no challenges by Alick, nothing but watch the farm in silence. Sometimes the tall young man would talk to her in her own tongue. He’d told her that night of the full moon, that in six days she should be on the promontory with a package of clothes that Prisca would take with her and leave there in the morning. Then for once, she’d be human -- fully human again. It would be wonderful!

The thunder of a horse’s hooves cut through her reverie. She instantly knew that it was a very light steed. She calmly rose and slipped into the bushes. Hidden among them, she watched a small white and brown beast quickly canter up to the farm. The rider was a dainty person sitting in side-saddle position. She was dressed in white with a large feathered hat on her head. Golden hair was carefully tucked up under it and her eyes were hidden by the broad brim. She slowed her horse with a light tug of her reins. Tabea noticed fine lace gloves on her hands. The blue eyes slowly filled with a jealous disdain. The great Cat rose silently and paced after the beast, crouched as if ready to spring. The young woman halted her steed in front of the house, oblivious to the beast behind her, but the horse sensed Tabea’s presence, slightly dancing around. Suddenly it whinnied, rearing up. The girl showed her superb riding skills, staying in the saddle. The sound brought Stev rushing around the house and Prisca flying through the door, Mother Pulleny on her heels. The young man reached up and grabbed the bridle, making a soft whickering sound. In an instant the horse had calmed while the large Cat sat on her haunches, curiously eyeing the stranger. Stev shot a reproachful glance at her.

“I’m sorry the Cat surprised your horse,” he apologized to the girl. “She is actually quite harmless, unless she get suspicious of someone.” He paused a bit at a loss for words. “I’m Stev Pulleny.”

“My name is Alisande,” the girl answered primly. Tabea pricked her ears. “I was looking for Dylan á Carrock.”

“Uh -- he’s not here now,” the young man told her. “He’s out and away.” Alisande nodded and slipped off her mount. It surprised him to find that she just barely reached to his shoulder. Something about her suddenly captivated him and he felt very awkward. His mother saved him from having to fumble for some words by stepping forward.

“Perhaps you would like to rest here, Lady Alisande?” she offered with a curtsy.

“I -- I guess that would be all right,” the girl stammered, tearing her gaze away from the young man. The big Cat nosed up to him and nudged his leg. The girl looked down and screamed.

“Don’t worry, she won’t hurt you,” Prisca cried, running and putting her hands around the beast’s neck, as if to protect her from the other woman. “Tabea is nice unless she gets mad, right?” A soft purring came from the large throat and the big tongue came out to give the little girl an affectionate lick. Alisande put a hand to her chest, as if to calm her pounding heart.

“Prisca is right,” the young man said, the only one who really understood that Tabea wanted to speak to him. “I’ll be in in a minute.” The Cat freed herself from the girl’s embrace and padded behind the house, the young man following. Finally she turned and faced him. He sat down on a low pile of wood.

“Okay, what’s all this about?” he demanded.

“She’s Dylan’s foster sister,” Tabea meowed. “He told me about her when he’d returned at the beginning of the year.”

“Foster sister?”

“His father seems to have adopted her, Stev. I hope that her being here is okay. I’m afraid that it might be something that Alick had in mind. You know about the Lady Roanna, don’t you?”

“I knew that she was Alick’s sister, yes, but what does this Alisande have to do with it?”

“She might or might not have something to do with ‘it,’ but let’s be careful. Don’t mention what I told you and *don’t* tell her who I am, okay?”

“Okay. Let’s go in the house.” He got up and she followed him, her sleek fur glistening in the morning sun. Deep in the woods the Wolf was moving at high speed towards his destination. It would not be long now.

Alisande had taken off her hat and gloves and was uncomfortably sitting at the kitchen table. A ray of sunshine from the window lit her pinned up hair like a shimmering head covering of gold. Her cheeks were reddened and her healthy, youthful beauty struck Stev like an enchantment, ensnaring him stronger than a thousand steel ropes. What was so capturing to the young man was registered with cool rationality by Tabea, who padded over to a sunny spot under the window and laid down, eyes half-closed, but always watching the stranger.

“Have you come a long way, m’lady?” Mother Pulleny asked, putting a rough cup full of fresh milk in front of her.

“Yes, I have -- from Enfurt.”

“That’s a long way,” Stev commented, sitting down across from her. “What would make you travel so far?”

“My -- my foster father Colyn á Carrock died,” she answered in a trembling voice. “It was so sudden. I -- the only thing I could do was to find Dylan. It had to be Lady Roanna. I never liked her too much.” The young man glanced at the Cat. The big head just barely nodded.

“Where did she go?” he asked.

“Back to Carrock. She gave me these silly clothes and the horse. We traveled almost to the castle. Shortly before we got there I fled. I think she’ll be able to find me here quickly.” The gray eyes looked liquid. “Please help me. I don’t want to go to that crazy wizard and I know the lady can’t stand me. She said that some man named Onri had asked for my hand.” A quiet hissing came from the Cat at the mention of the beau’s name. Alisande looked at her, shocked.

“Onri is hated by all creatures around here, almost as much as Alick himself is,” Mother Pulleny explained gently.

“We’ll help you, Lady Alisande,” Stev told her. “What could we do first?” She looked at her flashy garments and smiled shyly.

“Would you have some decent clothes?” she asked timidly.

“Tabea?” The Cat purred her consent to letting the girl have some of her clothes.

“That’s that then,” the young man laughed. “Mom will get you some.” Tabea rose and slipped out the door. A few moments later there were sounds of careful footfalls on the roof. The Cat turned her sensitive nose and ears to the road and waited. And the Wolf ran on.

The wait wasn’t too long. Evening was just beginning when about fifteen mounted men rode up to the Pullenys’ farm. None noticed the motionless beast sitting on the roof of the porch.

“Stev Pulleny!” the leader thundered. The young man came around the house, carrying an axe.

“Ah, Phillip, has Alick enlisted your help again?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

“I don’t like this either, but there was a slave girl who escaped the Lady Roanna’s entourage. Alick wants her found, or else I’ll lose my head and so will these men.” He raised his gloved hands apologetically. “I hope you haven’t seen her.”

“I have,” the young man admitted staunchly. “She’s here and you can tell Alick that. You can also tell him that she’s under my protection and that of Dylan á Carrock, being his foster sister.”

“What? Who told you *that*?”

“She did -- and so did Tabea, for that matter. She won’t be leaving here until Dylan has his rightful place again, Phillip. Tell your wizard that.”

“Hey, Sir Phillip,” a soldier with a scarred face snapped, “are we going to let this brat tell us what to do? It’s fifteen to one!”

“Shut up!” the leader shot back. “This young man happens to be my friend and I respect his protection and territory.”

“Well, I don’t. I’m getting that girl and the money.” He made to dismount, drawing his gun. In the same instant a black blur shot from the roof, bowling him over. The Cat was now sitting on his chest, forepaws on his shoulders, breathing down on his face. His eyes widened.

“Aiiee! The hell-cat!” he screamed trying to push the beast off. “Get it off me, get it off me!”

“Tabea!” The Cat retreated, hissing. The blue eyes were livid, the fangs and claws bared. This was the one thing they feared as much as the Wolf.

“I’m sorry to have to threaten you, Phillip,” Stev said quietly, “but if you and your men don’t leave within ten seconds, I’ll let the Cat go.” The rider smiled confidently and winked.

“Okay, Stev.” He made a sign with his right hand. *I’ll be back tonight.* Then he raised it over his head and signaled his riders. They turned and left the place, shaking. And the Wolf was now nearing his destination, no more than forty miles away.

Roanna stood by the fireplace of her room, watching the leaping flames dully. Alick faced the window, staring at the coming night.

“*Good* timing in killing him,” he remarked sarcastically. “And a good thing to lose that fool girl, too. Now *they* will know about it.”

“I couldn’t stand the old fool anymore,” she snapped. “And that girl was so cute. I wish I could have kept her.” The wizard turned around.

“He never knew who you were, did he?”

“No, unless someone else told him.” Alick nodded to himself and looked back out the window.

“Time is growing precious short, sister,” he hissed. “My birthday is one day away and Dylan is closing in on us. I believe the end is near.”

“Don’t say that, my lord,” she answered, taking a seat by the fire. “You still have some tricks up your sleeve, don’t you?” He looked at the sky with a melancholy attitude.

“I can’t find him, Roanna, no matter how hard I try. It’s like trying to look into a cloudy lake. You can’t see the bottom. I sense that even the Word has turned against us. Where did I step over the line? What border have I broken? I’ve adhered to *all* the laws written in the books. I never did anything to call this wrath down on me.” He lowered his head. “I’m afraid, for the first time in my life, deathly afraid. For the first time a mere man will have power over me. But I won’t let that happen.” His head snapped up, the dark eyes burning with hate. “I will *kill* him first.” With that he turned and stalked from the room, leaving the Lady Roanna to stare into the flames and ponder his words.



**M**OVING QUICKLY AND SILENTLY, the Wolf was nearly at the great promontory. The sun was going down in the west already. He didn’t have much time to find the place he’d hidden his clothes. This would be the *last* time. Now he’d break the power of Alick.

“The Word is with me,” he repeated to himself. The assurance of that small sentence gave him confidence. He would make it, fatigued as he was. Six days of non-stop running. Twice he’d been spotted by men, but they hadn’t been able to get him. Now he had very little strength left, but he knew he *must* get to the promontory first. He looked up, there it was. He painfully climbed the slope. There was still an hour till sundown. He’d made it! Slowly he laid his weary bones down beside the small cave where his clothes lay. He could rest until the sun disappeared.

Tabea had been impatiently waiting since noon, watching the east for any sign of the Wolf. She was certain that he’d arrive soon and wanted to be the first to see him. Still, idling makes one bored and it is often difficult for some people to do nothing but watch for someone when bored, so Tabea did what would be natural to a cat -- she

began to wash herself. She finally got so engrossed in her project that she missed the gray shadow sneaking by below the great rock and away to the small cave that she knew nothing about. When she was finished, she turned and watched east again. There was no sign of the Wolf. Slowly worry began to creep up in her, along with that pins-and-needles sensation. What if he didn't make it? Where would he take on his human form? Could she find him in time? While she was pondering these questions the sun vanished behind the mountain. The prickling suddenly became a white-hot flame and she cried out, a high-pitched cat-wail echoing among the cracks of the mountains.

Slowly she pushed herself up, rising on her feet, straightening, a full woman again. For an instant the moon caressed her supple form before she bent to retrieve the clothes that lay beside her. She dressed quickly, feeling the warming comfort of the rough cloth on her skin. It was not very chilly, but she knew that she was now fully human again and that ran icy thrills of joy up and down her spine. She stood hugging herself, looking out at the wide valley in front of her. Suddenly she heard a silent footfall and turned. A tall figure peeled itself out of the shadows, coming towards her in a stride she knew so well. She rushed into his arms with a little cry of joy.

"Dylan, you made it!" He just silently stroked the long, golden-brown hair, his eyes closed. *Tired, just so tired!* was all that passed through his dulled mind.

"I've missed you so much," the girl in his arms was whispering.

"So did I, Tabea," he managed to say, finally letting go of her and sinking on to a large rock behind him. She caught the fatigue in his green eyes and haggard face.

"You need to rest, Dylan," she told him, suddenly worried that he'd collapse on her. He just nodded and rose again with extreme effort.

"Come." She slowly led him down the hill to where Stev had hidden two horses. They mounted and quickly moved towards the Pulleny's farm, some miles north and west of there. As they rode, the young lord told his lady what he'd found out.

"This is going to be a battle between me and Alick, Tabea," he sighed wearily. "No one else will be able to help, except in keeping everyone else away." She just nodded silently. Finally the winking lights of the farm were in front of them. He reigned his horse to a halt in front of the house and climbed off, putting one hand against the wide flank of his steed to steady himself before slowly proceeding up the steps to the porch. Someone must have heard his heavy footfalls, for the door swung open and a slight figure rushed through it, throwing her arms around him. After a moment of surprise he recognized her.

"Alisande!" She stepped back and regarded him in a shy fashion. "What are you doing here?"

"I ran away from Lady Roanna," she said, a silent sob shaking her body. "She -- she killed our father." Now he took her in his arms to comfort her.

"It's all right, little sister. Father is probably happier where he is now than when he was here." He released her and then turned to Tabea, who was just behind him, taking her hand to show that actually they belonged together. With utmost effort he walked into the room and sank down on a bench, leaning his back against the wall.

"Hello, sir," he heard Stev say. He just barely nodded back.

"He needs to sleep," Tabea announced, trying to cover her shock over the pallor of his face. She gently ran her hands through his thick red-brown hair. He managed to give her his winning smile. With united strength they were able to heave him up off the bench and lead him into the spare bedroom where Alisande had slept the night before. He collapsed on the bed, not even bothering to remove his cloak and sank into blissful night.

The sun was already peeking through the window when he awoke. Someone had taken the time to undress him and carefully cover him up. Now he rose, finding new clothes on a low chair beside the bed. He pulled on the pants before going to the low wash basin and splashing his upper body and neck with the cool, refreshing liquid. *It's just what I need,* he thought. Somehow the exhaustion had totally vanished through those short hours of sleep. It couldn't be more than two hours past sunrise. Now he finished dressing in the wide, soft tunic and pulling on the rough socks and heavy boots. There was also a light belt with a holster on it. The pistol was lying on the night stand, wrapped in a soft, white cloth. He unwrapped it and checked its function, then wrapping it up again and putting it back down. He left the gun belt lying on the chair and went out into the main room. Everyone but Stev and Alisande were there, busy with various chores. His clearing his throat made them notice him.

"Good morning, people," he laughed as Tabea flew at him in a joyful embrace.

"Oh, Dylan, you're finally up," she whispered.

“Yes and feeling better every minute, lady love,” he answered, putting one arm around her shoulders and directing her to the kitchen table in the middle of the room.

“Where’s Stev?” Tabea giggled to herself before answering.

“He went out to do some chores in the yard and Alisande followed him.” The young lord raised one eyebrow. “I think she’s fallen for him,” his lady surmised.

“It very well could be. I just hope that she won’t keep him from doing his chores and that he will have a clear head to help me in my last battle against Alick.” The mention of the wizard suddenly sobered Tabea, who sat up straight and stared out the window.

“But I *could* use a little breakfast,” he announced with a smile. Mother Pulleny just laughed and placed a hunk of bread, a bowl full of butter, some jam, and a mug of fresh milk in front of him. He busied himself with the good food and after a short time was finished. He rose, wiping his hands on a wide cloth napkin.

“Now to find Stev,” he said and left the house, trailed by Tabea. After some searching they found the two young people in the barn, the girl milking the cows and the young man getting hay out of the loft for their morning meal, before being let out to pasture.

“I see you’ve put her to work,” Dylan called to announce himself.

“She wanted to,” came Pulleny’s voice from above.

“I would rather say that she did not want to let you out of her sight,” the young lord explained with a wink. “But we have to get going and find the others.”

“I’m coming,” Tabea announced.

“Me, too,” Alisande chimed in. The young lord shook his head.

“No, you’re both staying here. We’ll be meeting at my log hut this afternoon around four. You can come there if you want to -- but *no* disguises, okay?” They both nodded. Tabea put on a pretty pout and wound her arms around his neck.

“Are you sure, love?” she asked.

“About your staying?” She nodded. “Absolutely.”

“All right, I’ll stay here, after all I *am* a farm girl.” Dylan laughed quietly and planted a kiss on her forehead.

Finally Dylan and Stev were alone again, riding through the woods towards the little log hut that had been the young lord’s favorite hunting place. The horses needed little guidance, being Dylan’s own dappled gelding and Stev’s black mare. They’d been here often by many, many different paths. The young lord smiled at his one-time playmate.

“You’re quite thoughtful, Stev,” he remarked.

“Huh?” The other shook his sandy head. “I can’t get that girl out of my mind,” he admitted with a grin.

“Alisande?” A nod answered.

“Hm,” Dylan mused, “she did have quite a dreamy quality about her when she looked at you. Have you spoken to her about it?”

“I’ve only known her for a couple of days. I don’t want to jump on her in that way.”

“You don’t believe in ‘love at first sight’?” Stev shook his head.

“No, I believe that there is *infatuation* at first sight, but love has to develop -- like it did with you and Tabea.” The young lord smiled sadly.

“I didn’t have the courage to ask her to be my wife until some time after we’d slept together. I feel rather bad about that, considering all the trouble that my father caused by a similar action. Maybe *I* should be the one to go into exile, Stev. I just don’t understand it.”

“Forget it for now. You first have a bone to pick with Alick and then I thought you were going to have your wedding.”

“But don’t tell anyone about that yet, okay?” Dylan commanded with a grin. “I’m not even sure if Tabea is aware of my plans.”

“Oh, she’s aware all right. She told me herself.”

“Good, that simplifies things for now. But here we are.” They’d just broken from the wood and come into the small clearing where the little block hut was standing. Dylan dismounted and stretched his legs before tying up

his horse next to the others that were already there. He surveyed the area, realizing what a security risk he was taking. There would be watchers about, he knew that and Alick knew that *he* knew it. It made him grin to himself as he entered the room. The six men and two women were already there.

“My lord!” The first that came forward was loyal old Roche. He looked as if he’d had a rough time since Dylan had seen him last.

“Are you all right, old man?” he asked affectionately.

“As well as anyone who escapes Alick’s prisons, sir,” he answered with a straight face. Dylan looked around at the others. All but one were of the Gentry of Carrock. There was Phillip and Poul, Enfer and Galbin. Last of all, Will Michou was standing behind all the rest.

“So here’s my informant, eh, Will?” The barkeep just smiled quietly. “But I know that you can rally more men than any of the others here.” He looked at them silently, thinking for a long moment. Finally he leaned on the table and looked each of them in the eye. “I have a plan, ladies and gentlemen, and all of you have to help me with it, otherwise Alick will have his power in full. We *must* be finished by midnight tonight. Now this is what we’ll do...”



**T**WILIGHT WAS SETTLING and Dylan was now feeling very edgy. It seemed that he could almost feel the powerful fingers of the enchantment playing over him. It sickened him to think of it, but it would be over -- he would make it. But now there was Roanna to worry about also. Well, Alisande would take care of her, right? Dylan was not so sure. It was difficult to stay optimistic about this whole thing. *But I’ll make it*, he decided. *I can do this!* Suddenly he remembered what Savoy had told him.

“He is the one who deserves credit for your disenchantment, Lord Dylan, he and no other.” The Word. *Have I been forgetting him?* he wondered silently. *Go with us*, he then prayed and rose to enter the castle.

Alick uncomfortably shifted his weight in the high-backed chair. He could sense the presence of the true Lord of Carrock. Just be able to stall him until the sun came up. Roanna would help, he knew. It would be difficult to take care of the other traitors, but he would manage. There was no way that Dylan á Carrock could break the enchantment while he, Alick, still lived. And when he died, the young lord would die also. The wizard laughed at the thought, forgetting to add one vital constant to the equation -- the Word.

The ten conspirators were standing in the shadow of the outer gate. Dylan looked up at the high arch above him, remembering all the times he’d been here before. The sun was setting, playing its last rays around the mountain and letting them fall into the shadow of the giant doors.

“Well, people,” Dylan said slowly, “is everything ready?” They nodded silently.

“Then let’s do it.”

“Dylan.” Tabea caught his arm. Her eyes looked liquid in the failing light.

“You aren’t going alone, are you?”

“I am, lady love. It’s the only way. This is between me and Alick.” He brushed her cheek gently. “Remember, you’re the only one who can take care of Onri.” She nodded. “Then let’s go.”

Tabea enchanted. It was his only thought. Onri dazedly stared into the empty goblet in front of him. He’d stopped thinning down the wine hours ago. Only a few personal servants were around him at this hour, knowing that only strong drink would satisfy him now.

“I’ve tried women,” he drawled, “and I’ve tried wine. I think the only thing left would be death, hm?” He poured the goblet full again and rose, swaying back and forth. He turned towards a large picture of Dylan that hung on the wall.

“You know, Dylan, you’re damn lucky.” It ended in a drunken chuckle. “You got the girl that I’ve wanted since I saw her. Well, here’s to ya!” He raised the large, golden cup towards the painting and then lifted it to his lips.

“No, Onri, you don’t need that!” He turned and saw a swimming picture in front of him. He passed one hand in front of his eyes. Was he dreaming?

“I’m here all right,” the image laughed. It reached out and took his hand drawing him back to the tall, winged chair at the end of the long table. The dream perched itself on the arm beside him.

“Tabea?” He giggled like a delighted child. “So you really came, you’ve decided that I am your destiny. Ha, ha!” Behind the amused smile, Tabea wanted to spit on that bloated face with the red nose and liquid black eyes. His hand was already looking for her. She knew what he wanted. *But he’ll be out before he can take it*, she decided and leaned forward, capturing his eyes with her own. In the same instant she let a white powder fall from her fingers into the cup. He was pawing her now, making her wish she hadn’t come.

“Come on, Onri, drink up and we’ll find a more private place,” she whispered seductively. He obeyed and then tried to launch himself out of the chair, but collapsed in it, snoring peacefully. She should have let him just drink that last cup, not put the drug in it. She untied the rope that was around her waist and fastened his hands and feet to the chair, finally putting a gag in his mouth. Then she picked up the candle hat and put all of the lights out, save a single candle stick. Now Alisande would need her help.

Roche weighed the sword in his hand. He didn’t know why he had decided to use it instead of a gun. Still, they must start the attack as soon as they were sure that Dylan was inside. It would keep the guards from trying to help the wizard. Maybe they didn’t want to either. He looked up and suddenly saw a slight figure at one of the large windows. The light of the torch in her hand was a clear sign. The battle was on.

Tabea quickly closed the window and hurried from the room. Where, oh were was Alisande? Her feet quickly guided her up the dark stairs. Above her she suddenly heard voices -- women’s voices. One was fairly deep and very commanding, the other was an excited girl’s voice. She’d found them! She paused and slipped one hand under her dress to free a light pistol she’d hidden there. It only had two shots, but they should be enough. Stealthily, she continued her way up the steps and peeped through the open door. Roanna was standing with her back half to the door, Alisande in front of her, gray eyes wide with hate and fear.

“You wouldn’t *dare*,” she whispered, trembling.

“Oh, yes I would, child,” the lady said with a laugh. “I’ve waited for this moment so long. I won’t do so any longer.” She stepped forward to grab the girl, who seemed rooted to the spot.

“Excuse me,” came a sharp voice from behind her. She turned and saw Tabea standing tall in the doorway, her little pistol pointed right at Roanna’s face.

“So we have a third,” she remarked with a smirk. “That makes this even *more* fun.”

“Let her go, Roanna.”

“Do you honestly think you can hurt me, Tabea á Carrock?” the older woman mocked. “Today is *not* my birthday and I am not so scrupulous about keeping the rules as my brother is.” She laughed as the young woman’s eyes widened an instant.

“Oh, yes, Tabea á Carrock, I *am* a sorceress. How else do you think his highness, Colyn, your dear father-in-law, would have fallen for me.” She slowly took a step forward, one hand reaching towards the gun. “A few charms here, a little potion there and a powerful spell on our first night together was all it took. Colyn á Carrock was hooked and you will soon be also, my pretty. You will be under *my* enchantment.” It was like a heavy blanket was wrapping itself around Tabea’s head. She couldn’t see straight, she couldn’t even feel straight. All she could see were those brown eyes. While Roanna spoke her arm slowly lowered and she began to sink into something like a trance -- until the words “*my* enchantment.” Something in her snapped. *You can only be under one enchantment at a time, Tabea*, a gentle Voice whispered to her. *She can’t harm you!* The gun came back up and the blue eyes were clear again.

“Wrong, witch, I can only be under one enchantment at a time. You can’t harm me. Alick has me under his control.” Her eyes narrowed slightly. “Watch yourself, Lady Roanna, you are playing with a black panther who is ready to spring any moment.” There was something like the spitting of a cat in those words and for an instant the sorceress thought the blue eyes had taken on the form of those of a panther. Involuntarily she took a step backward.

“Alisande,” the cat-girl commanded, “come here.” The blond girl suddenly shook off her stupor and tried to slip by Roanna, but the witch was faster, grabbing her and using her as a live shield.

“Now, Cat,” she mocked, “try and get me *now!*”

*Where is he?* Dylan wondered silently. Surely the wizard wouldn't be in his quarters, would he? It was worth a try. He remembered being to Alick's great room only once, when he was five. It was in the big tower, the windows facing north and west. The wizard rarely got the sun into it, but he didn't care.

The young lord quickly and silently made his way through the halls of the castle of the Lords of Carrock. He had the distinct feeling that someone was there beside him. He paused twice, looking around, trying to find that someone, but he was alone. Still, the Presence did not scare him, no, on the contrary, he felt that if it were with him, he could destroy anyone who came into his path. He rushed up the stairs and suddenly stopped. There was the door, flanked by two huge statues of men with drawn swords. One had the head of a lion and the other the head of a vulture. The bodies of both were just barely human. Dylan hesitated.

“I -- I can't go through there,” he whispered to himself.

*Yes, you can.* He looked around, bewildered. Who said that? *Yes, you can!* There it was again. It was as if the voice had come from inside of him. *Do it, Dylan,* the Voice commanded. He squared his shoulders and set his jaw with determination, striding forward to the door. He grasped the handle and pulled.

Alick spun around. The door suddenly opened as if someone wanted to tear it out of its hinges. A tall and broad young man was standing in the doorway. The light of the fire reflected off his powerful arms and wide chest, making his determined, squarish face seem like stone and his red brown hair glow with majesty. The green eyes were burning with righteous anger. The wizard shrank back against his desk.

“Dylan!” he cried, his face going white.

“Yes, here I am, Alick.” The voice was angry and the older man thought he could detect a spark of hatred in it.

“What do you want from me?” he demanded, hedging for time.

“You know exactly what I want, wizard,” the young lord said, taking two long strides into the room. Now he was towering directly over Alick. It seemed strangely that he had shrunk and that the Lord of Carrock had grown taller. A commanding presence was all about him and also a great power that the wizard knew only from those who had close fellowship with the Word.

“I have come to break the enchantment.” Alick spread his blue-black robes wide to hide the table behind him.

“But why would you do that, m'lord. You are perfectly happy in the woods as a wolf, aren't you. I mean life couldn't be better.” He chuckled a bit lamely, the feeble attempt at mirth vaporizing under Dylan's scorching glare.

“No, Alick. This life was hell for me. I can't think straight, I can't feel straight and most of all I am losing myself to the wolf inside of me. This is the end of it, Alick. Tabea and I will be free.” He reached out one hand and unceremoniously pushed the wizard aside. There on the table in front of him were the two figurines, a book, and the crystal ball. He instantly picked up the smooth glass object and weighed it in his hand.

“Don't, please don't,” wizard suddenly wheedled. “Don't destroy it, Dylan á Carrock, I beg you. Take my life instead.” The young lord smiled sadly.

“Don't you think I know that when you die, I will die, too? And Tabea will go along with us. That would be worse than any of your other crimes, Alick.” He slowly turned towards the fire.

“Wait, wait,” Alick cried, still trying to buy time. “I'll take the enchantment off you -- and your lady. I'll teach you the secrets of my power. I'll make you as great as I am. Just don't destroy my ball!”

“It's the end, Alick the wizard,” Dylan said evenly and hurled the shining globe into the flames. The old man let out a cry of despair and collapsed on the floor, staring towards the fire. Suddenly an explosion boomed and bright light shot from among the flames tearing Dylan's feet from under him. For an instant he felt the immense pain of the transformation. He was a wolf again. He pushed himself up on all fours and slowly rose to his full height. As he did, the wolf skin fell from him like a veil and he was as he was before the enchantment, dressed in the brown and green hunting costume, his horn, pistol, and hunting knife on his belt. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank you, Word," he whispered. Suddenly something shot out of the shadows, bowling him over. The maddened face of Alick was over him a black dagger in his right hand. The young lord caught the wrist as it descended.

"You will die for this, Dylan á Carrock," the wizard screamed. Slowly the young man's grip tightened around the wrist until there was a cracking of bones. The hand opened and Dylan jerked his head to the side, the blade embedding itself in the floor only millimeters from his head. He pushed himself and the wizard off the ground and plunked the old man in the chair. He was now whimpering over his broken wrist. Dylan quickly knelt and picked up some loose pieces of wood by the fire. He then tore some of strips from the black table-cloth. With quick precision he splinted the broken arm.

"I'm sorry I had to do that, Alick," he said sadly, "but it's not my turn to die yet." The old brown eyes looked at him with malice.

"I bet you're sorry, Dylan á Carrock," he growled. "I will get even somehow." His head sank down for a moment. "Just answer me one question."

"Go ahead," the lord prompted. Alick's head came up again and his eyes bored into the gentle green ones across from him.

"Tell me when I stepped across the line. Where did I break the laws set up? Why do I deserve to fall?"

"You broke the laws the day you stopped using your great powers for good, Alick. Any who do that are bound to fall sooner or later." With that he rose and stood above the wizard. "You are not to leave this room on penalty of death until I call for you, is that clear?" he commanded. The old man nodded his head sullenly.

"Good." Dylan bent and picked up the dagger from the floor, sticking it into his belt. At the same moment Stev Pulleny burst through the door. There was a wound on his forehead and he held one arm tightly to his chest, as if hurt.

"Dylan, where are the girls?"

"You mean they aren't back with Roanna yet?" the young lord demanded, grabbing his friends shoulders. The other shook his sandy head.

"Then let's find them and fast." With that they stormed out of the wizard's chambers in search of the sorceress.

"I believe we are in a position to do some bargaining now, Tabea á Carrock," Roanna hissed, her long, fine fingers wrapped around Alisande's arms like white pincers. She was still holding the girl to her to ward off Tabea's bullets.

"Give me free passage and I will let her go."

"Right and Colyn died of old age," the girl snorted in disdain. "There is only one deal we will make. Let Alisande go, *now*, and then submit to custody. Dylan will judge you like he will Alick and Tennek."

"Do you think I'm so naïve, Tabea á Carrock?" the sorceress mocked. "I believe you would not be so careless if you knew my power."

"You may have power, Roanna, but you can't use it on me."

"But on Alisande." She leaned forward and whispered into the girl's ear. The gray eyes widened for an instant and then the pupils shrunk down, almost vanishing.

"Go and kill her, girl," she commanded. Slowly the girl moved forward, mechanically, as if being controlled by another. Tabea's hand suddenly became uncertain again. The light hand closed about her wrist like a vise. An instant later the pistol was on the floor and Dylan's lady was holding her wrist in pain.

"How do you like that?" Roanna asked with a smirk. Tabea's only answer was a growl, so real and cat-like that even the sorceress took a step backward. In the same instant the girl fell forward on all fours and a huge black Cat was in the room. She leaped forward, passed Alisande and felled Roanna, pinning her down with her weight. In the same instant the cat-face folded back into that of an angry young woman. She was wearing a dress with a huge tear down the front -- the one she'd worn at her enchantment. Her hands now closed around the sorceress' neck and began to tighten. In the same instant someone jerked her head back painfully, yanking her to her feet.

"Well done, Alisande," Roanna laughed, getting up also. She looked Tabea over for an instant.

"I believe, Lady Tabea, that now I *do* have power over you. You, see the enchantment has just been broken." She passed one hand down the girl's side. "I think I will have another very competent servant here, what do you say?"

"I don't think so, Roanna," came a commanding voice from the doorway. The witch looked over to see the broad form of Dylan á Carrock standing there.

"*You?*" she gasped.

"Let go of her, Alisande," the young lord commanded. Even through the enchantment the girl obeyed and Tabea fled to Dylan's side.

"You are under arrest, Lady Roanna. The charges are high treason and murder, not to mention adultery and witchcraft."

"And you, Lord Dylan, doesn't one of those apply to you and you lady?" the sorceress asked, not losing her composure for a second.

"Ah, you mean my sleeping with Tabea?" the young man asked. "That was not exactly adultery and though it isn't right, I did not touch another woman, *ever*. For that reason I am free of any charge, except that of impatience." The woman gritted her teeth and suddenly nodded her head. Alisande flew at Dylan, her fingers like claws. He caught her arms and looked into the maddened eyes for an instant.

"Alisande, come out of it," he commanded. In the same instant her eyes cleared, the pupils dilating.

"I -- Dylan!" She looked passed his shoulder to where Stev was leaning against the wall, blood running down the side of his face.

"Stev!" she screamed and tore passed the young lord to her beloved. Dylan now turned his attention back to the sorceress.

"It's over Roanna, surrender." The brown eyes were livid.

"No, Dylan á Carrock, it has only just started!" With that she turned and rushed to the window. She threw it open while running and didn't stop. Tabea and her man hurried after her and stared out into the darkness. There was no sign of her. The girl pulled her lover back from the window.

"It's over now, isn't it?" she asked, putting her arms around him. He slowly drew her into his own embrace.

"No, Tabea, she was right. The second half of our problems are only just beginning."

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